

Chapter 1

The countryside sped on around him by inches. So much had not changed in the slightest. It was as if he were looking at an impression of the past, a ghost; or perhaps he was the ghost...

"I'll have to drop you off and leave," said Fred, snapping Wilson out of his morbid musings. "I can't be seen with you. I owe money to everyone in town. I bet them you'd die."

"Ha." Wilson's gaze drifted back out of the window. One week ago it had felt as if he would be staying with Fred an interminably long time, making small talk with his new wife and watching everyone rush around and get ready for Fred's upcoming new baby. But Mrs. Wheeler had been delightful, and Fred had been jovial, and last night Wilson had woken up in the middle of the night wide awake in the realization that he would have to leave in a matter of hours.

They were getting ever closer to his house. Scenarios flashed through Wilson's mind wherein he asked Fred to take him along on the business trip lawyer thing in New York instead, or paid Fred to take him along, or made some kind of savvy wager, or calmly offered to stay with Mrs. Wheeler as some sort of undertrained physician's assistant and look after her while Fred was away- which would necessitate getting on a bus back to Fred's hometown, of course. Anything.

Of course he did none of that. Wilson was going to have to go home eventually, and it wasn't as if Father would dig himself out of his grave and wander back into his study if enough time were allowed to pass. He had nowhere else to go at the moment and it wouldn't be right to take time away from Fred's own family to make him continue to support his derelict cousin. Right.

"It'll be nice to see your mater, won't it?" said Fred. "You know, I'm surprised the whole female lot of Higgsburys wasn't crowding into my home to witness the return of the prodigal son."

Wilson snorted.

"That wasn't a joke," added Fred, "I honestly expected your family to want to see you."

"Why? It's not as if I've done anything interesting lately." Fred did not reply. His sandy eyebrows furrowed a bit at the center, giving him the whisper of a resemblance to a great horned owl, and that was it.

They rounded the bend and there it was. A gray-sided house, with black shutters. One shutter was loose and flapped in the wind with a slow, arrhythmic clunking sound of wood on wood. A few shingles had blown away. The gutters were full of debris.

"When did you last see your mother?" Fred asked.

"The Christmas before I went in the hospital."

Fred blinked slowly. "She didn't come to see you at all?"

"Of course not, she hates hospitals. You know that."

“She did not visit you once?”

“It was better for her not to come.” An edge had entered his voice. He refrained from saying *You convinced Father to come visit me and look what happened to him*. Freddy had meant well.

“Ah. Well, we appear to have arrived.”

The car came to a stop. Wilson made no motion to get out.

“Your mater’s car isn’t here,” Fred said with some surprise.

“We have a motor house in the back. They put it in when I was in school.”

Well, he couldn’t just sit here forever. Wilson stepped out of the car. His heart was doing little frightened things. He hoped his nerves were not obvious. He could hardly explain the circumstances... that there had been a dead man in the parlor the last time he’d come home... But not this time! Right?

Fred opened the back. “Let’s get this dinosaur of a piece of luggage in, eh?”

He heaved Wilson’s battered old trunk out of the car and set it down. Wilson stared at it.

“Problem?”

“Hm? Oh, my mind became a touch absent for a moment.” He had just been thinking that when he had entered the sanatorium he had fully expected never to take that trunk back out of it and here it was sitting in front of his house like he’d just been away on a trip. Funny, that...

Fred grabbed the trunk handle.

“Oh no no I can do that,” Wilson babbled, even though he couldn’t. He definitely couldn’t. The whole upper left portion of his torso was sore and after such prolonged inactivity pillows seemed heavy. He didn’t even want to carry the trunk. Why’d he said that to begin with?

Fred started hefting the thing to the door. “Nonsense, you’re always trying to get someone else to lug this awful thing around for you.”

He hauled it up to the front door and knocked authoritatively. Wilson hovered beside him. An unfamiliar woman in an apron opened the door. A new maid, must be.

She looked at Fred and Wilson with suspicion. “Hello?” She did not seem to like the looks of Wilson’s battered old trunk.

“Afternoon, ma’am! Just dropping off my reprobate cousin Wills,” said Fred.

“Sir, I think you have the wrong house.”

"No, this is my house," Wilson said. "I suppose Mother forgot to tell you I was coming?"

"Mrs. Higgsbury didn't mention any visitors," said the maid.

"I'm her son. I'll be staying with her for a while. I really am her son! There's a family portrait of us in the living room."

"Now hold on, she didn't say one word?" Fred asked. "Really?"

"Just look at the portrait," said Wilson.

The maid eyed them for a moment, then turned and bustled away. She returned holding a picture frame. "Mrs. Higgsbury asked me to take this old thing down," she said doubtfully.

Taken down? It must have made her upset to see a picture with Father in it.

"That's me," said Wilson, "in between those two girls on the left there. Of course, I am sort of young there! Uh, I'm about four, there..."

"It's clearly him," Fred added. "Look at that hair."

The maid still looked dubious.

"I wasn't planning to stay myself, but if you won't let my cousin here into his own family home I'll have to linger a bit, won't I?" Fred said.

The maid looked from one cousin's face to the other and back again.

“He’s been in hospital three years,” said Fred. “His mother really isn’t here?” Fred was getting steamed.

“Oh, what does it matter that she’s not here? She probably forgot when I was coming,” Wilson asked. “Look, I’ve got an old library card here somewhere.” He rummaged in his pockets. Good thing he hadn’t bothered to clean them out in three years! There was lots of stuff in here. Ah, and here was the card. “There. Higgsbury.”

The maid shrugged and moved aside. “All right, come in.”

Fred took the trunk into the living room and set it down. “Who all is in the household just now?”

“Beats me,” said Wilson.

“I do cleaning and cook,” said the maid. “No one else is here.” She eyed the trunk, turned her back on it, and left the room.

“Fine, I’ll just haul this bloody thing up the stairs to your bedroom like I was a servant myself,” Fred grumbled. Wilson opened his mouth to protest and Fred cut him off. “It’s not as if you can do it.” He hefted the trunk with a groan of effort.

The trunk was thus conveyed up the stairs and deposited in Wilson's bedroom. "I don't think this place has been cleaned since that old portrait was painted," Fred observed. Wilson looked over the room. It contained a bed he had never outgrown, a writing desk he had sort of outgrown but could still make to work, a bookcase that had some adventure stories and a few of his old school-books in it- Grade 1- and a pile of old toys that had been shoved off to the side instead of put away or thrown out. And dust. Lots of dust.

"It'll do," he said. "You need to get going, don't you?" "I... yes." Fred checked his pocket-watch. It was gold and hung on a little chain. Wilson had never seen him with that before. Perhaps it had been a wedding gift. "I should be going. Now, Wills, I'd be happy to put you up in a nice hotel, if you'd like. You can come along with me if you'd rather not molder here."

It would be quite easy to shrug and say 'All right' and get back in the car. "No, I'll stay," said Wilson, who had been overcome by a dreamy feeling of inevitability, a sense of fate, if one were fatuous enough to call it that... He also had a sense that he was rather too tired to go with Fred after all. Or do anything that involved leaving the house. It had been a long drive.

"Right, then." Fred gave him a look of unasked-for pity, clapped his hand on Wilson's good shoulder, and turned away.

The first job was to unpack his trunk. Wilson opened the old piece of luggage and was greeted by an accusatory tangle of bones. Perhaps it was best not to let Mother see that. Where to put it, though? He'd have to either take it out, take everything else out, and then put the skeleton back in, or jam a valuable anatomical specimen under the bed or something.

Did he really need to do all that right now? In fact, did he need to unpack at all? He didn't know how long he would be staying, but hopefully it wouldn't be too long. Surely he didn't need to unpack right away.

The room was soporifically warm. Wilson yawned into his sleeve. There was no knowing when Mother would be back and certainly she'd arrive full of questions. She might even have a welcome-back party planned, even though he did not like parties... anyway, he might not get to bed until late. After a moment of intense deliberation, he closed the trunk with a decided click. He would not nap, though! He had just spend years in a place where there was nothing to do but sleep. He'd had enough sleep, regardless of what his traitorous body might think. Exploring the house sounded like the thing to do. He had a chance to see it for himself without Mother shooing him away from anywhere or trying to direct him. He could get in touch with the old place, reconnect with memories... Make sure nobody was lying dead anyplace...

Might as well check the upstairs rooms first, since he was already up here.

His sisters' old rooms were boring, and a great deal less cluttered than his own. He wasted a moment or two wondering why Mother had had his sister's rooms cleaned but not bothered for Wilson, and then he realized the girls had probably seen to it themselves. There was something for his to-do list.

He had rarely ever been inside his parents' bedroom. There was nothing of interest in there- just the bed and the dressers and night-stands. Wilson was not yet so paranoid as to look through his mother's dresser. He would have a peek under the bed though. He'd hidden dead things under his own bed as a boy, it was a good hiding place. Holding his breath, he knelt by the side of the bed and peeked underneath...

A rotting hand!

Wilson jumped and let out a squeaky gasp. A second glance showed him that there was no rotting hand under his parent's bed! It was a dust-bunny. Bah.

He got to his feet, breathing heavily, heart pounding, left side of his chest aching. Bah.

Father's black ledger sat by the head of the bed on the right. His ledger for Very Important Business. Wilson stood looking down at it for a moment, his throat aching slightly. Even on his deathbed Father had never given up his business acumen.

If he opened the ledger, he could see that familiar neat, heavy-handed writing one more time... but it wasn't his ledger to open. He couldn't go prying into Father's things just because Father was dead.

Clearing his throat and turning away, Wilson noticed something red sitting in the corner of the room. He jumped a little. It wasn't blood or anything- or whatever he'd thought it might be. It was just a box of rat poison.

Enough of this. Time to go downstairs.

The family portraits were missing from the living room. All of them. The light square patches on the walls where they'd been were the only evidence that the pictures had existed.

Wilson touched the discolored walls and again had the sense that perhaps he was the one who was wrong here, not his surroundings.

He'd put it off long enough... he stepped into the parlor. Blood was all over the floor. Wilson blinked and shook himself. No blood was on the floor, not a speck. The curtains were red, and some light came through the fabric to create red shadows on the floor. Wilson poked around in the corners and found dust and the old piano. He touched a key. The note it played was loud and awkward.

There was a faint scent of rotten flesh in the air, or so he thought. Rotten flesh was a hard smell to get rid of.

Wilson left the parlor. Perhaps he would not return to it ever again.

The maid was in the kitchen wiping the counters, so he wouldn't explore in there. Wilson went through the dining room next instead. How many nights he had spent in there in the company of elderly relatives! Some of them had likely passed away while he was in the hospital. It wasn't as if anyone would have told him if they had. Anyway, there was nothing of interest in the dining room, only an empty table and chairs- and the large mirror that purportedly made the room look bigger.

Wilson avoided the mirror.

Finally, he wandered into Father's old study. Dust coated every surface.

Wilson burst back into the kitchen. "Why isn't this room cleaned?"

The maid looked up from a grimy counter that she was listlessly dabbing at. "Excuse me?"

"This room!" He pointed at the door.

"Mistress asked me not to touch it."

"It's filthy! It looks awful in there!"

"I have not been asked to clean it."

"Fine," Wilson fumed, and snatched away her cleaning rag.

“Hey!”

“I’ll clean it myself!” He headed into the study and started swiping at the dust, leaving odd little shiny marks everywhere. He had no idea how to clean anything.

The maid appeared in the doorway. “What’s in this room anyway?”

“It was Father’s study!”

“And where is your father?” She sounded laconic. Hadn’t seen the man, of course, and probably thought Wilson was still lying about belonging here at all.

“He’s six feet under!” Wilson snapped. “Why do you think my mom had you take down the pictures of him?”

“Oh.”

“Just leave me alone!” The door closed. Wilson batted at everything with the rag until he went into an allergic fit from all the dust clouds he was making and had to sit down in Father’s old chair with his handkerchief over his face. His heart was racing and his shoulder sore from the exertion. He couldn’t have been trying to clean for more than five minutes!

The room still looked horrible. He hadn’t done a thing to it. How weak he’d become... not that that should be a surprise, it was the reason why he was here and hadn’t purchased a place of his own. It would take some time to be up to snuff again, naturally. Maybe it was not the worst thing that Father was not here to see him.

This wasn't Wilson's chair. Or his study. He ought to leave. Yet he remained for the moment, partly due to shakiness, partly because of the hazy memory of sitting in here with Father to discuss some business thing that he didn't understand... this had been his favorite room, Wilson had spent hours in here with him...

A shaft of sun fell from the room's single window and soaked into the topcoat he had not bothered to take off. And then next thing, the sun had mostly gone down and the room was dim and cool. He'd slept for a while, cradled in old memories. Oops.

Wilson shuffled out of the room to find the maid still hanging about in the kitchen. She wasn't cleaning- she was reading a magazine. "Hello," he ventured.

She looked as if she had forgotten that he was there. "Oh, hello."

"Is Mother in?" he inquired.

"No, she hasn't returned yet."

Wilson nodded. He was sort of hungry. He hadn't had much appetite in... forever, and for about the same length of time had been surrounded by people who made him eat at regular intervals before he had the chance to feel hungry. Wanting food felt like a signal that he really was returning to health- like the sight of grass blades through snow.

He sort of doubted the maid would see any significance in him wanting food. More to the point, she did not look as if she would take kindly to being asked to make him food.

“Does Mother usually come home for dinner?”

“Sometimes she eats here and sometimes she dines out,” said the maid.

“Oh.” Well, of course she did! When she ate at home, she probably saw Father’s ghost at the table with her every time. Figuratively, anyhow. Poor Mother.

Wilson would almost consider dining out himself if he didn’t hate being out in public, and if he didn’t feel too worn out to walk to town, and if he had any pocket money.

There was a familiar yellow tin of Oreos sitting on the counter. A temporary solution! He took two cookies. The maid picked up her magazine.

The name on the tin was ‘Oreo Sandwich’ instead of ‘Oreo Biscuit’, but these appeared to be the same old cookies. He popped one into his mouth. Same old Oreo. They hadn’t had these in the hospital.

A motor noise! That had to be Mother. Wilson suddenly lost interest in the second cookie and put it back in the tin.

Her light footsteps approached. Wilson tugged at his coat, which had gotten sloppy and wrinkled from being slept in.

Mother turned the corner. Her eyes grew wide and she gave a little smothered scream of shock. Instantly the maid had Wilson in a headlock. He yelped.

"Came in saying he was your son, ma'am," said the maid.

"Oh! Oh, my goodness. He is. He is my son. Wilson, dear, what on Earth do you mean, coming early?"

If his captor were not a woman Wilson might have tried to knock her block off, even though he had little chance of succeeding in his current condition. Or maybe in any condition. She was built like an ox.

"Let him go, Allie," said Mother, almost as an afterthought. The pressure on Wilson's head and neck eased. He gasped, rubbed his throat and slunk away from the maid- Allie, apparently. He had not thought to ask her name.

"Why are you early?" Mother asked him.

"I'm not early. I was supposed to come today."

"Now, dear, I know you were not expected until next week," said Mother, in utterly reasonable tones. "I suppose you were fed up with that place, and came early."

"It was supposed to be today. Freddy had it on his calendar and everything. Could you have possibly made the mistake?"

“Oh, no, not me.” She did seem so reasonable. Perhaps it had been him. He could have told Freddy the wrong date. “There’s no shame in wanting your mother a bit earlier. However, I do have some engagements. You can’t expect me to simply put my life on hold when you show up a week early unannounced, can you, Wills?”

“Guess not.” But he was still mostly certain that he was not early. At least, he was fifty percent certain, or thereabouts.

“But I expect you’re tired, and would rather not see me tonight anyhow.” She turned to Allie. “I will dine out tonight. You can leave.”

“I didn’t eat yet,” Wilson said. “Oh, you want to dine out together? Catch up? Yes, I suppose-“

“No, dear. Allie, make him something before you go.”

“Ah. Okay,” said Wilson. Mother went upstairs.

Wilson hung around with his hands clasped behind his back. Allie viewed him with mild distaste.

“Ah,” said Wilson, “I told you I was her son...”

“What do you want to eat?”

“Oh, anything you want to make is fine...” She headed into the kitchen.

Mother reappeared shortly in a new outfit. She headed past Wilson without speaking to him. He followed her to the front door. Perhaps she did not know what to say to him. Perhaps he should start.

“You’re... er... looking well, Mother.” She was not, he noticed, wearing black, nor had she been wearing black earlier. Father had been dead eight months... Wilson didn’t know how long Mother was supposed to wear black, maybe this was fine.

“Of course I’m looking well,” she said, looking over her shoulder at him. “Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Well, I haven’t seen you in... years.”

“Did you expect me to have pined away and gotten ugly? Or perhaps you thought I’d be old. I’m not yet old, you know.”

“I just meant...” Wilson trailed off, unsure what he had meant.

She looked him up and down. “You’re not looking well.”

“I did just get out of the hospital a week ago.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Hospital. It’s really best you stay here,” she said. “I’m off. I’ll be back.” She swept out the door.

“Goodbye, Mother...” he mumbled. Well, that had gone better than expected. No sign of a murder anywhere!

Chapter 2: Cat-Astrophe

Wilson awoke to a brightly lit room, as usual. He rubbed his eyes and sat up. He had slept in his clothes again, and it looked to be about noon, from the amount of light streaming in through the window.

Enjoying the absence of anyone to tell him when he ought to be in bed, he'd quickly fallen into a routine similar to the one he'd had in school- he stayed up until about one in the morning working on his notes or dabbling with some chemical reaction. (At present he had very few reagents, only what he'd found in the house, so he could not in good conscience describe what he was doing as anything but play.) Then he slept until noon, got up, had lunch, puttered around the house, got bored, took an afternoon nap, woke in early evening, had dinner, and got to work on notes and such until one in the morning and so on and so forth.

He'd be able to wake up on time if he wanted to. It wasn't like anyone cared but himself, Mother was always out before he came downstairs and Allie liked it when he slept through breakfast because that made one meal fewer that she was expected to cook for him.

He nearly stepped on an empty water glass getting out of bed. "Oops," he muttered. He glanced at the desk. No free space there. He needed a real workspace. And reagents. And real equipment! Water glasses for beakers and flasks... terrible. It was like he'd regressed into a six-year-old.

He freshened up and went downstairs, finding Allie sitting in the kitchen and reading a magazine. "Good morning!" he said.

"I suppose you want your breakfast?"

“It’s lunch by now, but yes. Um. Allie, I had something else to ask you...”

“Oh?”

He should be somewhat considerate in wording his request. In the past, he had been known to startle domestics, and Allie was the sort who required one to be on her good side. “If you happen to find any rats,” he said, “allow me to dispose of them for you.” A dissection would do him good. He needed to brush up on his anatomical knowledge.

“We don’t have any rats, but I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Oh? I thought I saw a box of poison lying around.”

Allie shrugged. “I haven’t seen it, or any sign of rats.” But he was so sure he’d seen the poison. But not recently... where had it been? Oh, his parents’ room! Perhaps the box was old. Father might have been quietly dealing with the rats on his own, before his death...

Wilson sighed.

“Sorry to disappoint you with the lack of vermin, sir,” said Allie.

“Just forget I said anything.” He headed for the dining room to wait for his lunch.

There was a mirror on the dining room wall. Wilson sat where it was just barely visible in the corner of his eye. He should have asked her for a cup of coffee. Wilson was not accustomed to ask people for his morning coffee. In the hospital he had been brought whatever he was intended to eat or drink, and not brought anything he was not scheduled to eat or drink, so asking was pointless. In school he'd made his own darn coffee. He'd had an electric percolator.

He would like to make his own coffee again. Allie made it too weak anyway. Perhaps he would walk into town and buy the supplies, and then he could keep them in his room, which would be nice for his late nights anyway. Allie could not be expected to make coffee at midnight.

The mirror glinted at the edge of his vision. Wilson turned away from it and studied the wood grain in the table, which was beginning to chip. It would be a little while yet before lunch was ready. It might be easier for everyone if lunch was simply made at the same time every day but neither Wilson nor his mother had a set schedule at the moment. Allie never complained. About the timing.

He was avoiding looking at the mirror. That was silly. He turned to face it head-on, and was greeted by colorless skin, dark eyes underlined with a smudge of gray, and a rats-nest of hair. Oh Allie, I found the rats. Ha-ha.

She was about his age, but perhaps she did not know that, what with his corpse face and all. Allie had a fresh face, and a snub nose, and soft nut-brown hair that she must think looked very nice because she was always touching it and playing with it in a satisfied kind of way. It did in fact look nice.

He swatted at his hair, trying to smack it into shape. He heard footsteps. Allie with the food already? No, the footsteps weren't coming towards him...

Voices in the kitchen. "I'll be dining in today. I do hope you'll be making something better than those awful dry potatoes we had yesterday."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mother would be eating lunch with him!

She entered the dining room and stopped dead, looking at him as though he were a two-headed deer that had showed up on the lawn.

He waved. "Good morning, Mother..."

"Wilson! You're up early for you."

"Oh, not too early..."

She sat down. "Well, I'm glad to see you. I'm going out to run some errands and I wanted to speak to you before I left but I expected you to sleep in."

Wilson didn't ever sleep in past noon. At least he hadn't lately. Had he?

“Now dear,” she said, “I’m sure you’re getting anxious to go back to school, and I want to let you know that I will be ready to help you make arrangements to return just as soon as you’d like.”

The school thing! Right. He hadn’t expected it to come up quite this soon but Wilson was prepared for this, in fact, he had drafted a speech in his journal that hit all of the relevant points without, he thought, coming off as stilted.

Mother, as I’m sure you haven’t forgotten (He had not been sure she hadn’t forgotten, she seemed forgetful lately) I was quite close to finishing medical school when unfortunate unforeseeable events prevented me from continuing. Perhaps you think I ought to go back and finish. That is a reasonable thing for you to think, however, I have found that I am able to do the sort of work I wish to conduct very well without that degree, and in fact, attaining the degree would take my time away from this work! So, since this is important work, and I don’t want to be a physician, there’s no call for me to go back to school. It would just delay things that have already been delayed long enough by three years in the sanatorium.

Mother was waiting for him to speak.

Wilson looked down. “Er.”

“Don’t bite your nails, Wills, it’s a filthy habit. It’ll put girls off.”

There was another note somewhere in his journal about girls.

Mother, I am aware that you and much of your family think that I ought to marry. However, I do not want to get married.

And then he had left off because no one ever believed him when he said he didn't want to get married, so why waste his breath?

Now, he took his fingertips out of his mouth without a word.

"Well?" Mother asked.

"Well what?"

"When are you planning to return to school?"

She would almost definitely forget all about it if the subject was allowed to lie dormant. "Oh, you know, eventually..."

"Wilson." There was a subtle warning in her tone.

"Well, I mean. Ya know... Dad wanted me to go because he thought I oughtta have something to fall back on..." He waited to see if Mother would interject an opinion here. She did not. He continued. "But see, I know what I want to do, Mother, and it's not practicing medicine, so I don't think that I really need to go back, I mean, it's expensive, you know."

"Your cousin finished his degree. And he's a lazy, philandering drunk."

This wasn't going well. "I didn't mean to not finish." He didn't bother defending Fred, it wasn't like she'd listen. "But I'm here now, and I don't need anything to fall back on so I don't think I need the degree, and- and- so there you go."

Mother folded her hands on the table. "Wilson, I thought-" She broke off, pursing her lips.

"Thought what?"

"I thought you would have grown up a bit by now."

Wilson pressed his back against the chair. "I fail to see how it's childish to know what one wants to do in one's life, and to opt to follow a career instead of more schooling," he said, half-conscious of his boarding-school-trained English accent becoming more marked in his speech. It was the accent Father- who had been born and raised English, not merely sent to school there- had had.

Mother looked pale. "It's childish because it's selfish. You're selfish. You only want to do what you like to do, and enjoy yourself, you don't want to do anything that your family wants you to do, you don't even want a wife."

Wilson folded his arms over his chest and leaned back, an action that made him aware of the way his back wasn't shaped right anymore- it butted against the chair in a misshapen way.

Mother had said much the same thing the day after he'd arrived, he did not remember what had brought it on then. He had protested then, and tried to make her feel that he was a good son and not selfish, and it had seemed to work. But the next day she had said the same things to him. And again two days later. Now it was the seventh day of his stay, and the fourth accusation of selfishness. He didn't care to respond.

"You can't live your life that way," Mother said. "You can't just live free and easy, taking money from your criminal uncle." Nothing had ever been proven against Uncle Alvin but Wilson had made up his mind not to argue. "One has to finish school, one has to get married, one has to be a grown-up. You can't just get out of it by saying you don't want to!"

Wilson squirmed in his seat. He was dying to say that a scientist worked to improve all of mankind by collecting knowledge *it was the least selfish career in the world* but he'd tried that before and she didn't seem to understand. Also, if he was so selfish, he'd-

"You'd make a rotten husband anyway," said Mother. He hadn't expected her to come out and say so. "You're rude, you're arrogant. You think I'm not as smart as you, don't you? You men are all the same. Look at you. You look like death. You haven't any money, you're a dependent. Who are you to sit in judgement?" Her voice was rising.

"The maid will hear," said Wilson. He didn't truly care whether Allie overheard, but maybe Mother would stop talking.

"ALLIE! Where is lunch? You lazy little hussy!" And Mother stormed out of the room.

Oops. Poor Allie.

Wilson nibbled on one thumbnail. Mother had yelled at him before, of course, but she had never been quite so... disapproving as that. She was recently widowed. Perhaps she was in some way angry with Father for dying and leaving her alone- feelings did not always make sense- and she was projecting that anger onto Wilson. (There had been a psychiatrist on staff in the sanatorium who had spoken regularly with the patients and after three years of weekly meetings with him, this line of thought came naturally.)

If this was so, she was also projecting her feelings onto Allie, apparently, because the most vicious imprecations were coming from the kitchen. Of course, the last time Wilson had visited home, Mother had also been acting a bit on edge, and then he had found out that she had killed someone. And Wilson had never really believed in psychology anyway.

He found that he had bitten his thumb to the quick.

Wilson waited for Mother to go back out, as she usually did, and as she had said she was going to do, but instead she retreated to the living room with her knitting and stayed there, looking somewhat stormy.

Of course, it was her house! Maybe she didn't want to go out. That was fine. Perhaps they could hang out. Catch up. Or perhaps Wilson would go out!

In the end, Wilson went out. He could have taken the car, probably. Mother didn't really like him to drive... in her current mood, perhaps humoring her was best. And she might yet go out and she would want the car. He didn't want to take the car anyway, he had always used to walk to town and back.

He set out under the impression that he had improved a great deal, and the walk to town should be, if not entirely comfortable, entirely doable! This impression turned out to be somewhat misguided. Wilson arrived in town, somehow, out of breath and soaked in sweat. It was a warm day in late August and perhaps badly chosen for a walk.

Encountering a bench by the sidewalk, he half-fell into it. What had he been expecting? Before today the farthest he'd been accustomed to walk had been downstairs to the dining room to eat, or down the hall to the bathroom. Why would he think he could just walk to town? Never mind that it was a short little twenty-minute walk that he had previously been accustomed to walk two or three times to and fro in a day if he felt like it.

He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them he noticed the small children watching him from across the street. They looked wary.

Wilson recalled the face he had seen in the mirror that morning. Add that to the fact that he was currently gasping and sweaty, and he must really look like a mess. He gathered his strength and hauled his aching husk off of the bench to go closer to the kids.

They didn't scream or run when he came near, at least, though their eyes got round. They were looking at his head. At his hair, more likely. Wilson had taken his hat off to let some of the heat built up in his head escape, now he put it back on.

"Good morning," he said. "Er, afternoon, I mean. How are you?"

"We're well," one child ventured.

“Why are you guys out here by the road?” They had a cardboard box between them. Wilson peered into it. A writhing ball of fuzz was inside. Hearing tiny mews, he was able to put two and two together and differentiate individual creatures from the mass. *Free to good home* read the side of the box.

“Cat had kittens,” one of the children said, not the one that had responded to his greeting. This one was rather surly.

They were both wearing shapeless hats and had kind of a samey look but one was shorter, the surly one. The taller one was wearing a skirt. Brother and sister?

“I don’t suppose someone wanted to drown the poor things,” said Wilson. When he had been home from school on vacation once, the cat who came by the house- not their cat, just a stray that frequented the place- got into the cellar and deposited a parcel of kittens there. He distinctly remembered one morning waking up and seeing Mother out by the pond dropping a sack of something into it. The cellar had been devoid of feline inhabitants when he went down to play with the kittens. (He had naturally wanted to play with the kittens, being only a boy of seventeen at the time, but they’d probably had rabies, Mother was right to clear them out. That was more than ten years ago now. He had a vision of the years of his life slipping into the toilet.)

The children looked upset. "I mean," said Wilson hastily, "one shouldn't drown kittens... not if they're domesticated... and don't have rabies." The children looked more upset. "I was only joking! The kittens are cute. I don't suppose..." A kitten would make a decent substitute for a rat, dissection-wise. "Well, I might have a good home for one of these little things." He looked into the box. One kitten looked back at him with clear, intelligent yellow eyes.

The kitten Wilson selected would not suffer, not a bit; however, it would very much die. He would not choose the one that seemed to be attempting to make an emotional connection with him. How about that little one huddling in the corner? It looked scrawny and frightened and it tried to claw at Wilson when he picked it up. He held the soft creature to his breast. It calmed down quickly and huddled against him, shivering. He could feel its tiny heart going.

The children's eyes were round. "How'd you do that?" asked the boy.

"Do what?"

"Calm her down like that. She always scratches me."

The kitten was a calico, so he supposed it really was female. Calicoes generally were. "Oh, it's easy. You just, uh..." Well, animals usually calmed down as soon as he picked them up without him doing anything special but it mustn't be like that for everyone or no one would get scratched. He shrugged, a motion that still felt odd with his new bone structure. "I dunno."

The kitten felt as if it were held together with softness and glass. He felt tiny ribs. This one hadn't been getting enough to eat. "Poor thing." And with those two words he saw himself nursing the wisp back to health and watching it grow into a sleek and confident predator. Oh no no no. This kitten was for science! Sentiment had no place in science.

"I'll take her," he said.

The girl's eyes were bright and her lip was trembling. "She's a nice kitty, mister."

"Oh, uh..." That girl appeared to have an attachment to this particular kitten. It seemed delicate; probably it had excited her fledgling maternal instinct, and perhaps she had been hoping no one else would take it as it was the runt. "I'll be nice to her..." That little heart was still humming in his hands. "I'll name her Theodora Roosevelt and raise her to be a fierce mouser."

"Her name is Cat-therine."

“Oh, she has one already. Alright, I’ll call her Cat-therine,” said Wilson. That was a cute name. Clever, too.

That girl was still looking at him, all forlorn, as if she had guessed his true intentions. Cat-therine’s breath was warm on the back of his hand. A small speck of life.

“Uh, I live in the big house on the hill back there,” Wilson said. “You can come visit her! Yes, I’ll just take her home and feed her up and... uh... I guess I’ve got a cat now.” If the girl ever showed up, she had better not find her cat pinned to a dissecting board.

Both children looked shocked. “Well, that’s the intention of giving kittens to good homes,” said Wilson, “for strangers to come and take them, and give them homes.”

“You live in the big house?” said the boy.

“Yes.”

“You’re a Higgsbury?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a ghost, mister?”

“No. Ghosts aren’t real. I look like this because I’ve had consumption. Uh, I’m not catching now though, I don’t think. Maybe you’d better stay over there though.”

“Don’t talk about that stupid story, Billy!” the girl said, nudging her brother.

“What stupid story?” Wilson asked.

Billy was quite ready to talk about that stupid story. "The lady in the Higgsbury house is crazy and murdered her husband. Ain't you her dead husband come back for revenge?"

"No! I'm her living son."

Billy's eyes gleamed. "It's your momma that's crazy?" *I've never met a guy with a crazy momma before!* was stamped on his snub-nosed face.

"Billy!" the sister whined. "His momma's not crazy. That's mean."

Mother? Crazy? A murderess? A murderess of her husband. Father rumored to haunt the house! How silly! Yes, just silly, just the silliest thing ever.

"You made him sad," the sister said. "Lookit. You shouldn't make people sad when they've had consumption. You're a little rat, Billy."

Wilson shook himself out of the slight stupor he had fallen into. "Ah, no, he just has a spirit of inquiry, I was the same at his age. Look, though, my momma's not crazy."

"I see 'er in town sometimes," said Billy, "an' she talks to herself."

Talked to herself? Well come to think of it Wilson had heard her muttering a bit over her knitting but "I talk to myself too sometimes."

"Are you crazy like your momma, Mister?"

“No! My mother isn’t crazy and I’m not either! I’m eccentric, is all. I’m a scientific genius, they’re eccentric. And my mother is lonely. Because she’s a widow. Because my father died of natural causes. Actually, he was in the big war and got hurt, and he never really got better.” *Actually, if anyone hastened his death... he went downhill shortly after visiting me in the hospital, so draw your own conclusions.* Irrational thought! He would not speak it aloud.

Billy looked, if anything, more intrigued. “Were you in the big war?”

Ah yes. Boys and war. “No,” said Wilson. “That’s the thing about consumption, it’s not compatible with a career in... anything, really, except deathbed poetry and stuff like that. You know, I’ve just been talking to you kind of a lot, and I’m supposed to be going to the bank.” He couldn’t very well walk into the bank with a kitten in his arms. He slipped the precious little mite into his waistcoat pocket where she curled up over his heart and began to purr.

The girl let slip a surprised giggle. “You put Cat-therine in your pocket!”

“Don’t you ever put small animals in your pockets?” The girl shook her head and giggled again. “Well, I do it all the time,” said Wilson. “I’m a scientist.” To tell the truth, Wilson had no idea how to talk to children. “I should go.”

“Watch out for your crazy poisonin’ momma!” Billy yelled as he went.

Poison?

Wilson turned, crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue at Billy, and went on his way in the knowledge that he had just argued with a six-year-old on his own level and it had come naturally. He needed to move out of his mother’s house.

He had recovered from the walk to town but for the drumming of his heart, which beat out of time with the kitten’s tiny purr. Was that from overexertion and the last clammy grasp of illness, or was his heart remembering what his head kept dismissing and pooh-poohing- the box of rat poison in his parents’ bedroom?

We don’t have any rats.

Father’s old bank was a large, distinguished-looking building with Greek columns out front. Wilson had hung on those columns as a kid, trying to make his arms meet around them, looking up along their length and marveling at their height.

The building was still standing, somehow, even though its most important column- Percival Higgsbury, Jr.- had been knocked down before its time. And inside was the same polished financial institution he remembered. Just as if Wilson had never been gone.

He wanted to talk to old Mr. Smith, but when he asked to see Mr. Smith he was told that Mr. Smith was not there any longer but Wilson could speak to his replacement. At which he was whisked off and shortly found himself in Mr. Smith's office with someone else behind the desk, a wide, smooth-looking fellow with a prodigious moustache.

"What's your business here then?" the man asked.

"I want to see how much is in my account," Wilson mumbled. He hadn't spoken to a stranger in quite some time- a stranger over the edge of 8, anyway- and something unpleasant was happening to his stomach. This man was huge. And he was in Mr. Smith's office.

The man viewed Wilson from down the length of his moustache.

Wilson squirmed and tried not to make a weird face. Cat-therine was wriggling about in his pocket and it tickled. He did not want to explain that there was a kitten in his pocket.

"How much is in your account? Why don't you know what's in your account?"

"I haven't, uh... been in here in a while..."

"Where's your passbook?"

"I, er... my mother probably has... I'm n-not certain." Wilson had been so convinced that he was going to die that the passbook had slipped out of his notice a long time ago. Mother had claimed never to have seen any such thing when he'd asked yesterday.

The cool look he received at this said very clearly: *You rotten young fools these days. Country's going to pot.* "What's your account number?"

"I d-don't recall."

"You don't recall your account number?" the man asked.

"No, er..." Wilson glanced at the nameplate. "Mr. Forsythe."

"You don't recall it at all? You don't perhaps have it written down?"

"No, sir, and I know you'll think that's awfully irresponsible but I've been in hospital." He had expected to die and not need his bank account number. Mr. Smith would've understood, Mr. Smith had known him and Father, he didn't think this guy had known Father at all.

"In the hospital?" Mr. Forsythe rumbled. "I suppose that's a good excuse to forget everything. Remember your name, boy?"

"Wilson H... Higgsbury."

"Hihiggsbury? Never come across that one before."

"It's just Higgsbury," said Wilson, louder than intended. He missed things every so often but he was well aware of when fun was being had at his expense. He'd had enough practice. "My name is Wilson P. Higgsbury, and my father used to run this bank."

“Oh?” At the look the man gave him Wilson’s throat closed up. He nodded. “Hm,” said the man. “I’ll see if you have an account.” He withdrew a ledger from his desk. “Higgsbury with an H?”

Wilson nodded and slouched in his seat. What else would it start with?

Cat-therine, having now made herself quite comfortable in his pocket, had begun to knead his flesh with her rose-thorn claws. He looked very disagreeable at the moment, no doubt.

Silence fell while Mr. Forsythe sifted through papers. The silence was broken shortly by loud swearing out in the hall. Wilson started upright and Cat-therine dug in her claws in fright. The door burst open. It was John! Father’s old assistant! He looked well, but angry. “You know what this world is coming to today?” he barked. “You know what this world’s coming to, Harry?”

“No,” said Mr. Forsythe, “what is it coming to?”

“My kids are out there givin’ away their kittens, right? Cat had kittens.”

“What a nuisance.”

“So my daughter’s out there with her kittens givin’ ‘em away and this slimy little S.O.B. shows up, takes a kitten, grabs her favorite kitten, sees her cryin’ over the damn thing, and invites her back to his house- I knew we should’ve drowned them. He was a real slime-ball, too, greasy, sweatin’ like a pig. I’d like to knock his block off.”

How awful! Men trying to bring little girls back to their houses! And John's daughter had been, what, four when Wilson left? She'd only be eight now. She'd be unrecognizable now.

Oh.

"I took them home," said John.

"The kittens?" Mr. Forsythe asked.

"The kids. Left the kittens in the box."

Perhaps Wilson should explain, or perhaps he should look away and hope John left. It had seemed like an innocent thing to say at the time. 'Come see the kitten'. And to think, he'd only approached the children in the first place because he didn't want them to think he was creepy!

Wilson slumped in his seat and looked at his legs. They'd gotten real skinny. His pants hung on them like scarecrow pants. That seemed to be the fashion nowadays but Wilson hadn't chosen it. Also, it was a stupid fashion.

"That is bound to end badly for the kittens," said Mr. Forsythe.

"Oh, who cares. What've you got here? Customer?"

"The gentleman has no passbook and has forgotten his account number," Mr. Forsythe said glacially.

"Are you sure this is your bank, friend?" John asked, peering into Wilson's face. It took him an agonizingly long moment to recognize him. And then: "Sunny!"

Wilson gave him an ingratiating smile. "Hi, John."

John straightened up to his full height. "Harry, this isn't just any old customer!"

"I know," said Mr. Forsythe, "he's a customer with no passbook and no account number."

"This is Sunny! He's the son of the old man."

"Old man?"

"This bank was built by Percival Higgsbury, friend. This is Wilson Percival Higgsbury. We call him Sunny."

Mr. Forsythe raised an eyebrow.

"Well, look how sunny he is," said John.

Wilson flinched.

"He's got an account," said John. "Where are you looking?"

The two men consulted over the ledgers for a few incomprehensible moments and then John said: "Here ya go, Sunny. What was it you wanted?"

"I want to know how much I got."

"Twenty bucks even, old pal."

"Oh." His disappointment must be evident.

Both men were viewing him with curiosity, open and avid until nearly hostile on the face of John, more grudging from Mr. Forsythe. He wasn't going to tell them anything, how he had hoped there was a little more- enough to talk to a real estate agent, if not enough to actually rent anything. They would say 'Why didn't you have some idea of what you had'? and he would not care to explain why he had forgotten all this stuff.

"Can I have that out please?" Wilson mumbled.

"Sure thing, kid."

Well, twenty dollars wouldn't get him out of his mother's house, or out of this rotten little town, but it would get a few flasks and things. That was a start.

John led him into another room to get the cash. "Don't spend it all in one place, now," he said, holding out a wrinkled twenty-dollar bill. Wilson took it with an involuntary noise like a cynical collapsing balloon- and quite suddenly there was a meow from his pocket.

John looked at him strangely.

"Aha," Wilson said, feeling clammy. He took Cat-therine out of her hiding place and displayed her. Her tiny whiskers trembled in John's direction.

"What the devil?"

"I, er, picked her up on my way in." John peered at him and looked as if he was mentally putting together Wilson's appearance with his children's description.

"I didn't mean anything by it of course," Wilson babbled. "Sally just looked so sad to be losing the kitten and I thought I'd offer for her to come see it, you know, I really thought she'd forget about it in ten minutes anyway. I didn't think she'd want to actually come over. It wasn't even a real invitation. I would've told her who I was of course but I didn't recognize her! She's grown so much. Er, not... like... well, she's no longer a toddler, I mean."

John said nothing.

"It's not just me at the house, you know," said Wilson. "My mother is there too, and our maid, so it's not as if I was going to be alone with her! Of course you won't let her come over now anyway, that's only natural. Not that I wanted her to actually come over! I mean, uh, I say things sometimes that aren't... a good idea..."

John suddenly laughed. "Boy! If I'd known you were out of that hospital, I would've known it was you." He clapped Wilson rather hard on the shoulder. "You watch out, kid, I don't want to read about you in the news. It's for the best anyway. The next guy that came along could've been a genuine sicko." He began to guide Wilson out of the building.

"I truly am sorry, I didn't mean to... well..." Wilson cleared his throat. "Er, by the way. Your son seemed... familiar with my house."

"Invited my boy over too, did you?"

"No! But he had heard of my house. And my mother. Has my mother been... doing anything unusual lately?"

"Your ma? Nah."

"Your boy seemed to think my house was haunted."

"Probably because he saw you in it, Sunny. Eh-heh."

"No, he'd heard of Father's death..."

"Schoolkids. I dunno what that boy is babbling about half the time myself."

"Look," said Wilson, with an unexpected courage born of irritation, "your son told me a very specific rumor about my mother poisoning my father to death. He didn't get the idea in his head from nowhere and I'd like to know where he heard it."

"It all sounds like nonsense to me. How do you know he didn't make it up?"

"Because he didn't even know my family. He mistook me for the ghost of my father, which tells me he'd never seen my father, because I look absolutely nothing like him."

But for his aquiline nose- which was still not quite like Father's, being slenderer and more pointed- Wilson could have easily been mistaken for someone with no genetic information in common with his father- or his sisters, for that matter, who all did take after Father. He was, in fact, in build, coloring, and nearly in facial features, a male version of Wilhelmina Higgsbury.

Father could not have known that when he chose to name his newborn child 'Wilson', as newborn children looked like misshapen red beans more than anything, but the name was quite apt. Wilson. Wilhelmina's son. Crazy Wilhelmina's crazy son...

"I don't know anything about it, Sunny," John said now.

"That nickname," said Wilson, very distinctly, and loudly, and almost involuntarily, "is so clever. Because, you see, my name has a part in it that sounds like 'sun', but I have very pale skin and a melancholy demeanor! Which is the opposite of being sunny! It's genius!"

"Glad you think so. Have a good day, kid. Come back if you forget your account number again."

Wilson was deposited on the front steps outside. Hold on! He hadn't been told his account number. Nor had he been given a new passbook. He turned to request such a thing but John had already gone back inside and Wilson didn't really want to talk to him any longer anyway.

There was a bench outside the bank. Wilson sat on it. It sounded tempting to just go home, but he'd gotten this far and he ought to get his errands done while he was here. Plus, it did not sound at all tempting to start on that long walk back home. He was beginning to wish he hadn't come. Or that he'd at least taken the car.

He let Cat-therine wander about over his hands. She was so tiny! Wilson did not have large hands but they dwarfed the kitten. Poor thing was still mewling- she must be hungry.

On impulse, Wilson pressed the warm fluff to his face. The kitten quieted. Its flank rose and fell against his lips.

The door to the bank opened at the edge of his hearing. John was speaking and coming nearer. Wilson quickly turned away to avoid his face and held the kitten close out of sight. He had already come off as weird enough today without John seeing him hanging out on benches kissing cats.

"You be careful with the kid, Harry," John was saying. "He's delicate."

"He's odd," said Mr. Forsythe. The two of them must be on their way out for coffee or something.

"Ha! Odd! You don't know the half of it. He's been in some kinda hospital for three years. The old boss went white worrying about him. Not a lot said about it."

"The loony bin, you're implying."

“Well, you saw him.” John stopped short then because Wilson had appeared right in front of him.

“The loony bin! Me?” he barked.

“Sunny! I-“

“I’ve only been lying in bed hacking up my own lungs for three years! And this is the homecoming I get?”

“Well, excuse-“

“They took out four of my ribs. Four of ‘em,” and he took off his topcoat. John’s eyes went directly to the drooping left shoulder. The doctors had assured him that it wouldn’t be at all noticeable if he had his clothes tailored around it, but so far he hadn’t, and the deformity, though slight, was quite visible.

“Oh,” said John.

“You wanna call me a nut again? It looks nasty but I still punch southpaw!” He made a fist. “You’ve been going around telling people my dad died because his son went crazy? Come on! I can take you!” He turned to Mr. Forsythe. “Here, Harry! Hold my coat! And my hat!” The mewling kitten was still in his other hand. She looked awfully confused. “And my cat!”

“Hey, hey, let’s not do this,” said John. “I apologize. You’re not nuts.”

Wilson rounded on him, fist still clenched. “You’ve been telling everyone I am?”

“Not at all.”

“You’ve been telling everyone my ma’s off her rocker and poisoning people?”

“No.”

“What else?”

“I shouldn’t have said that,” said John.

“And my name ain’t Sunny,” said Wilson.

“All right.”

Wilson turned away. His face was hot. John’s remaining calm had just allowed it to sink in that Wilson looked a fool. “Good day to you, sir,” he said, snatching his hat out of Mr. Forsythe’s confused hands and donning it. He headed away at a brisk pace, or as brisk a pace as he could manage, being so hot and out of breath. Should’ve stayed home.

Chapter 3: A Little Chat About Historically Relevant Events

The diner was nearly empty, as it wasn’t a mealtime. Thank goodness for that.

Wilson sat at the counter. He didn’t recognize the proprietor. Well, it wasn’t likely that he would, he had never been one to go out much, but it was a relief anyway.

"I'd like a glass of milk," he said to the man. The man raised an eyebrow but produced the milk.

Wilson carefully put some of the milk into a spoon and set the spoon on the counter. He took Cat-therine out of his pocket and set her by the spoon.

The man behind the counter raised both eyebrows. Cat-therine lapped thirstily. Wilson stroked the line of her tiny spine from neck to tail. "There you go. Good girl."

"That thing doesn't have fleas, does it?"

He didn't know for sure. "No."

The man shrugged and went about his business. Cat-therine quickly finished her meal and sat trembling with her whiskers out. Poor timid kitty. Wilson picked her up and held her. She purred.

"Actually," he said, "I don't suppose you serve liquor here?"

"Nope," said the man with another raise of his eyebrows.

"That's a shame."

"Ain't that the truth." A hot toddy would be nice about now. He'd just have to wait until he got home to have one.

Wilson drummed his fingers on the counter, to the obvious annoyance of the proprietor. He stopped. Twenty dollars- sans the payment for the glass of milk- would get quite a few useful things, but he would have to plan it out carefully... have a look at what he really needed... perhaps he ought to save the shopping for another day. It was getting late and he had a long, exhausting walk back home ahead of him. Maybe a cab...

He required some fortification and liquor wasn't forthcoming so he downed the milk that Cat-therine hadn't needed before leaving the diner. His legs were sore as well as his chest. He got as far as the curb before stopping for a moment of recovery.

Hold on! What was that? He'd seen that motor-car before. Or so he thought... but wasn't one car like another?

He could see the passengers now. It was the right car! "Hey!" he called, waving. "Hey!"

The car pulled to a stop. The driver's door opened. And there sat Uncle Alvin! All wide and gingery and, though a little more wrinkled and weather-beaten, his sharp eyes were as sharp as ever. And next to him was Auntie Irma.

"Wills, my boy, you old rascal! What d'you mean coming to town and not seeing us?" Uncle rumbled. "Get in the car!"

Wilson scrambled into the backseat. Aunt Irma twisted in the passenger's chair to look back at him. She had lines on her face but brighter eyes than most girls of Wilson's age. She was wearing a lovely hat and a gauzy dress. "My dearest nephew!" Her only nephew. "Come and kiss me."

"The seat's in the way, Auntie."

"We'll manage, come here." They wriggled around and she managed to plant a firm kiss on each cheek. She smelled of jasmine. "You're looking well," said Auntie.

"No he isn't," said Uncle in an expansive tone, "don't patronize the boy, Irmy."

"All right," Auntie said. "You're not looking well at all. Come home with us and let us feed you, you're skin and bones."

"Okay," said Wilson. Wait, though! Mother would not expecting him to be out late, and she had for some reason never liked the Wheelers, so if he went with them, wouldn't he make her worry?

Eh, she didn't seem to notice what he did. She'd probably be out when he got home anyway. And he liked the Wheelers. And they'd paid for his medical care, so he owed them a visit whether he liked them or not! Surely she could see that.

Cat-therine moved around in his pocket. Oh. "Actually, I'd better be getting home!"

"Oh, nonsense, come for just an hour or so," said Auntie.

"No, er-" He took out the kitten and showed her. She laughed.

"What's that for, then?" asked Uncle Alvin.

"Well..." The little girl who had owned the kitten would certainly never know if anything happened to it now. John would never in a million years let her anywhere near the house.

Cat-therine turned in his hand and looked at him imploringly.

"She's a pet," Wilson confessed.

"She's darling," Auntie said. "I suppose you need to take her home." She turned to Uncle Alvin. "Let's take the boy home, dear. I daresay he's tired, anyway, and we do have the Andersons coming over."

Just a bit tired, maybe. And not fond of the Andersons, but he wouldn't say so. "It's good to see you. How've you been?" he asked.

"Us? Splendid!" Auntie said- although for just a moment he thought he detected a dimming of her cheer. Perhaps he was projecting his own feelings onto her. "You?"

"He's poorly," said Uncle Alvin.

"Do I really look as bad as all that?"

"Worse."

"You're beginning to sound a touch critical, dear," said Auntie.

"Well, I am critical! I'm downright hacked off, in fact. I paid that hospital good money to patch up my nephew and those pill-shooters did a wretched job of it. I could sue for damages, you know."

“They did a pretty good job actually,” said Wilson. “Most people in the condition I was in end up dead.”

“As if I would have let you die,” Uncle dismissed. “I told you, Irma, we should have sent him to Switzerland. We could do it now. The boy needs fresh air.”

“Where are you staying?” Auntie asked, seemingly ignoring her husband.

“With Mother, of course.”

“Oh!” She developed a peculiar facial expression.

“She’s lonely,” said Wilson. Though now that he said it, she didn’t seem lonely. She didn’t seem to want to spend time with him either.

“Ah, you know, speaking of Mother, there seem to be some silly rumors going around about her.”

“And what are those, pet?” Auntie asked.

“Well, er...” Wilson was unsure of how bluntly to put this to someone as utterly nonaggressive as Aunt Irma. Oh, well, she was a grown-up, and she didn’t like Mother. “I’m hearing rumors that she... um, poisoned... my dad. I know, it’s ludicrous. And mean. I’m just wondering where on Earth it came from.”

“Ah, well,” said Auntie, “I’m afraid... well, this likely isn’t news to you, but your mother has a great deal of... well, not enemies, exactly...”

“She’s disliked.”

“Right.” She looked uncomfortable. Why, she was trying to protect Wilson’s feelings, wasn’t she? He felt a one-sided smile creep onto his face. How sweet of her. How entirely unnecessary.

“Auntie, I... well...” The one thing he could not say was that the month before he’d been checked into the sanatorium he’d found a dead body with half a face lying in the parlor. “I’ve worked in a hospital morgue,” he said instead, though it was entirely inadequate. “I’m not... squeamish.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“There’s nothing to that bird-brained rumor,” Uncle Alvin dismissed. He broke into a wet cough.

Wilson recoiled, blinking. He had experience with hearing people cough. “Have you had that looked at? You should have that looked at.”

Uncle waved him off. “I have, ‘s nothing. Irmy, just tell him about his mother.”

“Your mother is not popular,” said Auntie, “and when my brother passed away after being in her care, some people said awful things. You know Percy didn’t like to talk about his troubles.” She began to twist her pearl necklace back and forth in her hand. “I doubt many knew how badly he was hurt in the war.”

“Well, if that’s all it is,” said Wilson. An idiot could see that she was upset by all this. He shouldn’t have asked. “I’ll just ignore them.” He almost tossed out that he’d heard another rumor about himself being locked up in the nut factory to highlight what nonsense this all was, but just in time realized that that would upset his aunt even more and for no good reason.

They pulled up at his house. “See ya, sport,” said Uncle Alvin. “Thanks for the ride.”

He walked up to the front door. It was locked. Wilson looked over his shoulder. His aunt and uncle were sitting there in the car watching him. Wilson tried the door again. Locked. Before he could start panicking in earnest, he recalled that the key was under the mat. He retrieved it, unlocked the door, shot a queasy smile back at the car, and slipped inside.

He set Cat-therine up with a little bowl of water and a sheet of newspaper and then crawled into bed. He crawled out of bed a little while later, sweating and thirsty. The sunlight from the window had made the room oppressive while he slept.

Cat-therine was curled up by his pillow. She was asleep. He left the room without disturbing her. Wilson didn't know what time he'd gone to bed so he didn't know exactly how long he'd been asleep. It was a few hours or so later, judging by the lengthening shadows in the house. He got a drink of water and sat in the living room, sipping it.

The day was growing dim and he was toying with the idea of getting up to turn the lights on when the front door slammed open. Mother walked in with loud, clacking footsteps. She walked into the living room and stared at Wilson. "Who's here?"

"Eh?"

"There are tire tracks out front; who have you brought here?"

Wilson's brain, normally a fine-tuned and efficient machine of which he was quite proud, was fogged from sleep and it took him a moment to puzzle this out- all the while Mother stared at him. "I haven't brought anyone here! But I went to town today... and I ran into Aunt and Uncle..." He at the last moment decided not to say which aunt and uncle he had met. He had several of each, after all. "They gave me a ride home. They didn't come in, though."

"You didn't bring anyone here?"

"Mother, I don't have any friends," he said, bemused. "I thought that was a matter of concern with you..."

"Do not talk back to me."

“Sorry.” He had only been thinking aloud but on second thought he had sounded a little disrespectful. “I’m telling the truth,” said Wilson. “I just got dropped off by the front door.”

Mother began to pace. “This entire town is against me, Wilson. I don’t need you to be against me too.”

Wilson said something that he might not have said if he were wide awake: “I know, Mother. I heard those awful rumors going around about you. I’m so sorry.” He had thought to pacify her but as she turned towards him, face pale, nostrils flaring, he realized that perhaps he ought not to have let on that he knew.

“What rumors?”

“Oh, er... that... that I was in the madhouse! It must be hard for you to hear that stuff about your family.” She viewed him with some emotion he couldn’t quite pin down, though he knew it was not exactly warm and fuzzy.

“Is that it?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s all.”

“Well, if you’d act normal, people wouldn’t assume such things about you. It’s no fault of mine,” she said. “I don’t know why you thought that had anything to do with me.”

“Right, of course. Don’t know what came over me.”

“I’m going back out, I only stopped to get a few things.”

“I won’t have anyone over, don’t worry.”

She took a step closer to him. "If you get fresh with me, Wills, I won't take it lying down."

"Yes, Mother. Sorry, Mother." She left the room. He shuddered. Boy, he needed to get his own place.

Chapter 4: Murder And Meow Mix

Warning: Wilson gets his hands on something to dissect in this chapter. There's a brief, non-graphic description of that at the end.

Wilson was awakened by a female scream.

He bolted into the hallway. "What is it?"

Mother was at the end of the hall, staring at the old curio cabinet with wide eyes. "Mother, what's wrong?" *Oh please don't be a dead intruder oh please.*

"There's a rat," she said with a point.

"Rats! We do have rats. Ha! That's a relief. I mean, oh, how disgusting. I'll get it," he said, lying down on his belly to peer under the cabinet. What he saw was not a rat. It appeared that, being a very small animal with a flexible spine, Cat-therine had somehow escaped his bedroom! It also appeared that Wilson had entirely forgotten to tell his mother that he'd brought home a cat! He was just meeting with rousing success in all social affairs lately.

Given Mother's current frame of mind and fears of persecution, perhaps he ought not to bring up just now that he had adopted an animal without her permission. "Oh, Mother, this isn't a rat!" he said instead. He pulled out the trembling kitten by the scruff of her neck and displayed her. "Look who's come to visit. I don't know how she got inside, but isn't she cute?"

"Get it out," said Mother.

"She's cute though. Look at her tiny paws."

"Get it out of here."

"Oh but--"

"Look, vivisect it, kill it, do whatever it is you do but get that cat out of here," she said.

"Er."

"I'm your mother. You don't think I've seen your bedroom? If only you were just into sex and filth like normal men."

Wilson had to pause to consider that one. He finally chose not to address it at all. Instead, he said: "Mother, you seem stressed..."

"Cat," she said with an emphatic point at said cat, as if he were too stupid to understand the word 'cat'. "Out." She turned on her heel and walked away.

"Okay," Wilson muttered. Cat-therine was too young as yet to jump very high... she had only made it onto his bed because his chair and writing desk were arranged in such a way as to give her a path.

There was a barrel of potatoes in the kitchen. Wilson carefully removed the few remaining potatoes and placed them in the cupboard. He folded a blanket and put it in the bottom of the barrel. He put in Cat-therine's water bowl and newspaper and finally placed in the kitten. Cat-therine thus taken care of, Wilson turned away to begin work.

He had decided that before he purchased any real equipment he ought to have a clean space to put it. Allie would not exactly jump at the chance to clean his room, so he'd just do it himself. Or start, anyway. Besides, if she did it she might throw away something he still wanted.

He made three piles: obviously junk, obviously not junk, and possibly junk. The not-junk pile looked as if it would be the smallest. The old textbooks were the most obviously junk and the first to go on the pile- they were from the 1890s and probably no longer even accurate. Next was the dismantled train set and the broken toy robot.

Underneath the robot was a scummy heap of something that resembled fur. Wilson hesitantly teased it out of the pile of junk and discovered a moth-eaten stuffed bear. This was Sir Worthington the Third! He still remembered the day when Father had handed him over- he'd had plush fur then, and eyes. Wilson had since given this thing the very destructive love that only a small child could. He'd thought Mother had gotten rid of this years ago!

Sir Worthington the Third went in 'obviously not junk'. Actually, on second thought, he went on the bed next to Wilson's pillow. No one would ever know.

He heard the car. Glancing out the window he saw Mother disappearing along the road in front of the house. Hm, well, maybe it was time for a break.

He went downstairs to scrounge up something to eat. Allie was there- he hadn't heard her come in. She must have walked. Nothing surprising in that- the surprise was that she was already cooking something. Smelled like eggs. "Be done in a minute," she said.

"I'll leave you to it!" He sat in the dining room and she came in a little while later with eggs, bacon and toast. "Thanks," he said. The food was such a distraction that he did not notice for some minutes that she was staying in the room and watching him eat with an odd expression.

He thought of poison and became annoyed with himself. There was no call whatsoever to suspect Allie of anything but mild laziness. "It's very good," he said.

"I'm leaving your employ, sir."

"Eh?" He set his fork down.

"I can't work with that woman anymore."

"She didn't kill my dad! Those rumors are fake."

"Yeah, I heard 'em, that's not why. Anyway, I'm leaving."

“Oh.” Wilson had had somewhat limited experience with maids but he knew Allie was not a terribly good one. Perhaps the good ones would not work with Mother. But that didn’t mean he wanted her to leave...

“So if you’d be so kind as to give me my last week’s pay,” said Allie, “I’ll be outta your hair.”

“Me? But I don’t, you know-“ He picked up the fork and put it back down, staring at the surface of the table. “I’m not in charge of that.”

“You’re here, though, aren’t you? She’s not here.”

“Can you just wait for Mother to get back?”

She simply looked at him patiently.

Wilson sighed. “Oh... all right... I know where she keeps the household money.” Having lost his appetite anyway, he got up from the table. The cash was in the china cabinet. Not the empty one upstairs, the one by the front door that had cracked, dusty china figures of dogs in it. “How much do you earn in a week?” he asked, taking the wad of bills out of the back of the drawer.

“Seventy-five.”

“Wow, you don’t come cheap.” He handed over the requisite amount and put the cash back. Good thing Mother had plenty here.

“Thanks, Mr. H,” she said, and headed for the front door. He watched her leave across the front lawn.

“Wait, Allie-“

She turned. “Yeah?”

“I can’t make you reconsider?” He wouldn’t be helpless without her or anything. Wilson’s housekeeper had quit one day while he was still living in Maryland, rooming with Fred- something about finding his experiments. Anyway, instead of hiring a new one Wilson had just learned to cook a few basic things. He sort of enjoyed it, even, especially soup- there was something nice about a pot of soup on the stove. He could probably pick up a few cleaning skills relatively quickly as well, now that he needed to.

But...

“No,” she said. “Sorry.”

“All right. Bye.” He closed the door. His tone had been brusquer than he intended. *I’ll be alone with her*, he couldn’t help thinking. Not that that was Allie’s problem. And no money to move out with... Uncle Alvin would quite probably give him some if he asked. Maybe, anyway. But Wilson would have to earn eventually; he couldn’t run to his aunt and uncle for the rest of his life.

Maybe some of his old stuff could be sold. Probably not, though, most of it was garbage.

Something must have woken him, but he didn't know what. Wilson lifted his head off the pillow and looked around the room. Nothing amiss, but he had the distinct sensation of having woken up from some disturbance...

He had gotten most of the sorting done and then had desperately wanted a nap. He thought he had slept for about an hour, judging from the shadows on the walls. Ah, a creak of a foot on floorboards from out in the hall.

Cat-therine was curled up next to his pillow. He picked her up. She squeaked. He was planning to tuck her back into her barrel hiding place and leave the room but the door opened before he could do either.

"Oh! Mother!"

Her eyes went to the kitten. "It's still here." Her tone was flat.

"Uh, I didn't get to it." He put the kitten back into the barrel.

"You're keeping it."

"Well..."

"Come here." Her dull tone was becoming a bit of a concern. He stepped out into the hall.

"I need to tell you-" he started, but she cut him off.

"How could you?"

"How could I what?"

"Steal from your own mother."

“What? Oh!” The missing household cash. “I didn’t. Allie quit, and I gave her her last week’s wages. I was just about to tell you.” He hadn’t even thought about taking the money, although now that she brought up the idea, there had been enough there to be very helpful in Wilson’s situation.

Mother took the sides of his face in her hands and looked right into his eyes. “Don’t lie to me.”

Frozen and locked in place into the unaccustomed contact, he did not think he sounded convincing when he said: “It’s true! I mean, she isn’t here, is she?”

She took her hands away from his face. Phew. “Maids don’t get paid seventy-five dollars a week.”

“Don’t they? She said...” She had swindled him, hadn’t she... “It’s a misunderstanding. I’ll sort it out tomorrow. As for the cat, I’ll keep her up here. You won’t have to see her. She’s my cat, I’ll take her with me when-” He connected the crack with the pain that burst in the side of his head but as he was looking away he did not associate either with Mother at first. When he looked back at her her hand was raised.

“Did you just hit me?” What a stupid question.

Her eyes filled with tears. “How could you lie to me?”

Wilson sounded calmer than he would have expected. “I didn’t take your money and I don’t deserve to be hit!” But not entirely calm.

“Nothing gets through to you and I-”

“Good night, Mother.” He stepped back into his bedroom and quickly shut and locked the door. His ear was stinging. She’d hit him rather hard.

She sobbed and he heard her walk away. He ought to go out there and resolve this somehow, but he didn’t know what to say. She seemed determined not to believe him. ‘Nothing gets through to you,’ she’d told him? Geez.

Wilson rubbed the side of his head. His jaw was tight and his throat was choked. If she hadn’t been a woman- and his mother- he probably would have hit her back, but as things stood, he couldn’t do anything but stand here and fume.

He couldn’t stay in here all night. There was no bathroom in here. Maybe she’d leave...

He sat down on the bed. After a few minutes, she did leave- he heard the car outside. That was all well and good, but eventually she would come back. What then?

She once again came upon him sleeping. In the dark this time.

“Wills?”

He couldn’t see a thing. “Yes? What? I didn’t take that money.”

Her voice was soft and sweet. Too soft. She was lightly drunk. “I know you didn’t, poor thing. You’re a sweet boy.”

“You smacked me upside the head!”

"I'm sorry, darling. I was only frustrated." She came closer and stroked his forehead. He couldn't squirm away, that would not go over well. "But that won't happen again, will it?"

How am I supposed to know? I can't tell what will or won't make you mad at me until I say it these days. "No, Mother."

"Good night, darling." She kissed his forehead.

Auntie Irma still hugged and kissed Fred when she saw him, even though Fred was a few years older than Wilson, and that seemed normal, so why when Mother did it did he just want to push her away? Was he really truly as very selfish as she thought he was?

"G'night, Mother."

She slipped out of the room. Well. Everything seemed okay again, although his nerves thought differently, and he didn't know how he was going to get back to sleep. But she seemed to have forgiven him for the real offense of the cat and the imagined one of the money, so this should be over for the time being.

Cat-therine's tiny body was lying on the floor in the downstairs hallway. Wilson nudged it with his foot. No response. Dead.

Mother was rattling around in the kitchen, singing to herself.

Wilson picked up the dead-leaf-weight corpse. It was cold. He brought it into the kitchen.

“Good morning, Wills,” said Mother. “Don’t bring that in here, it’s dirty.”

She must have gotten out of the barrel. She must have fallen down the stairs. No, her body showed no signs of injury. Internal injury? She was so cold.

“Wilson,” said Mother, “take that out of here.”

“She died.”

“Cats will do that.” What? “Get rid of it, won’t you?” She looked up at him. “Are you upset?”

“Little bit,” he mumbled.

“Oh, don’t be. It’s just a cat. Take it outside.”

Wilson did not do as commanded but instead took the departed feline up to his laboratory/bedroom. A perfectly healthy kitten did not just drop dead. She must have been sick. If he’d noticed, maybe she would still be alive.

Having worked in a morgue for five consecutive summers Wilson naturally performed a necropsy. He expected to find feline distemper, internal injuries, or worms perhaps... his examination revealed cyanotic gums and an inflamed, ulcerated stomach, full of tuna. From a can. Freshly ingested. Wilson hadn't given it to her. He hadn't even known they had tuna.

He drummed his fingers on the desk. That vindictive shew. Who did she think she was going to fool? Certainly not her son, a medically-trained chemist, who had attended countless autopsies and could easily recognize the effects of arsenic. Not to mention that arsenic was easily tested for with a bit of sulphuric acid and zinc, which he had on hand in the meager collection of chemicals he was gathering, and promptly used now to detect the poison's presence in that mystery tuna. "You want to play, Ma?" Wilson muttered, rubbing his bruised ear. "I can play."

Chapter 5: Learning Basically Nothing

No one would believe him if he said anything. No, sharing rumors was all well and good, and one could gossip and laugh in corners, but if Wilson were to stand up and claim that he thought human lives may be in true danger, he would be the next one in the rumor mill. Caution was needed here. Caution and finesse.

He entered Dr. Cobble's office at 1:30 PM. Mother was out and would never know; if she did find out, what was suspicious about a recovering TB patient seeing a doctor?

Having just walked from the house, he looked dreadful. The secretary greeted him with alarm in her eyes. "I'll let the doctor know you're here, shall I?"

“Yes, thank you. It’s a matter of life and death, you might say.”

She hurried off and he sat down in the waiting room.

Wilson had been a dramatic child and occasionally a sickly one.

He had spent quite a few hours in this waiting room with various symptoms of childhood illness... he’d had a nanny up until he was six, she had brought him and held him on her lap in here, and played games with him to keep his mind off his sore throat or itchy rash or whatever was wrong with him. He didn’t quite recall her name. He’d always called her ‘An-Nan’, having coined that moniker when he started learning to talk. It wasn’t her real name, obviously. Hopefully she had gone on to a happy life after being dismissed.

If there weren’t such pressing things to be attended to first he might try to find out what had happened to her... he hadn’t thought of her in years. The familiar surroundings had brought it back.

The secretary re-appeared and beckoned him inside. He went into the examining room and sat down in the chair next to the table. Now, this room brought back some much more recent and more unpleasant memories.

“Well, well, Mr. Higgsbury!” Dr. Cobble greeted him.

Wilson held up one hand. "Wilson, please... ah, Mr. Higgsbury was... my father." The room was clean and smelled of antiseptic. That had been the smell of the laboratory once, now it was the smell of 'Take your shirt off hmm there's still a crackle on the left how about another six months in here' and he felt the urge to bolt.

"I see. What appears to be the trouble, Wilson? Your coloring is hectic."

"Oh, I'm fit, actually," he said between gasps for air, "I've just walked in for town and I'm a little... out of breath. S'nothing. Not used to being up and about." He swallowed.

"You've been out of the hospital for two weeks now, hm?"

"Almost three." There was a dull, pressurized pain in his chest.

"It's time you had a checkup, I'd say." Dr. Cobble started bustling around preparing various instruments.

Wilson tensed. "Oh I don't know if I want to take up your time. No, I don't think I really need a checkup."

Cobble paused. "If you're fit as a fiddle, and you don't think you need a checkup, why are you in my office?"

"I had some questions about Father, actually." He paused to swallow and collect his breath before continuing: "See, no one will talk to me about how he died. They don't want to upset me, they've still got it into their heads that I'm an invalid."

"I see. I'd be happy to answer your questions, but under the circumstances I really believe you could also do with an evaluation." Dr. Cobble approached him with a thermometer in hand. "If nothing else I like to see what's happened to my patients after some strange sanatorium has worked them over."

"No, no! I can't talk with that in," said Wilson.

"It'll only take a moment. I haven't been your family's physician for thirty years to let you put your foot back in the grave through neglect, my boy. What would your mother think?" Dr. Cobble had known Wilson his entire life- quite literally. He'd attended at his birth. The doctor's aspect was rather paternal and he did give off a strong impression of knowing what was best.

Wilson submitted to the thermometer. The round, smooth, familiar, tasteless thing in his mouth almost made him retch.

"Your father's death was quite ordinary," said Cobble, looking at his watch. "He'd never quite gotten over that injury to his hip or the near-fatal pneumonia that followed."

Wilson flinched. He had a clear memory-image of Father lying wasted and gray in a London hospital bed.

Cobble removed the thermometer and peered at it. "Hmm."

"If it's slightly elevated it's just 'cuz I walked here in the heat."

"I see." Dr. Cobble took Wilson's wrist into his soft, practiced hands and felt for the pulse. He frowned. He released Wilson's wrist and his arm snapped back to lie close to his chest. "Strip to the waist, please, I'd like to check your heart and lungs."

That sounded like potential bad news. "Aw, no, I don't think..."

"This is for your own good, you know, and free of charge. Strip." Wilson started undoing his buttons, nibbling on his lower lip. It was always possible for the TB to come back. He had hoped that if it did, it would do so when he was out on his own, without the notice of anyone who would march Wilson back to the hospital. He would rather die in his laboratory. It was too late to back out of the checkup now, though.

"Sit on the examining table if you please." Wilson climbed onto the table. He had been distracted from his primary purpose in coming here, he realized. He ought to stay on track.

"So Father just... faded away?"

"That's about the size of it," said Dr. Cobble, pressing the cold bell of the stethoscope to Wilson's chest and taking a moment out from speech to listen to the heart sounds, before saying: "I'm sorry about your father. But you needn't worry about it being hereditary, I take it that was why you asked?"

"Yes," said Wilson. A handy excuse indeed, if a somewhat mercenary one.

“No congenital heart disease or anything of the sort. If you’re so interested in watching out for yourself you might submit to a few more evaluations, and with better grace, eh?”

Wilson ignored this. “Was an autopsy done?”

“Oh no, it was a clearly natural death.” He was going behind Wilson to auscultate the back. Great. “I take it you’re familiar with this procedure.”

“Yes, get on with it,” Wilson said more sharply than he had intended. Dr. Cobble started tapping all over his ribs.

“This is some major surgery you had.”

“I’m aware.”

“Any pain in the surgical site?”

“No.” Which meant, sometimes, especially after exertion of the surrounding muscles, but he didn’t want to bother with doing anything about it. It would heal on its own.

“Have you been short of breath? You’ve lost some lung capacity.”

“I’m just fine, thanks.”

“What lung you do have left to you is clear as a bell, I’m happy to say.”

Wilson closed his eyes and slumped forward a little. “That’s good.” Getting off track again, though. “But Father! My father had no gastrointestinal complaints before he died?”

“Not at all. Why, do you have such complaints?”

“No.”

“Let’s check your abdomen anyway,” said Dr. Cobble.

Wilson stared at the ceiling while the good doctor prodded at his belly/ “And Father was never cyanotic...”

“Don’t speak while I’m examining you, please. Tenses the diaphragm. And no, he wasn’t that I saw. These are some oddly specific questions.” He said it mildly, without suspicion.

“I was nearly a doctor myself,” said Wilson. “I like to get a picture of things...” He might be going about this the wrong way. An experienced physician like Dr. Cobble would certainly have noticed the signs of acute arsenic poisoning and become suspicious! Wilson had not thought of that in his eagerness to go out and attack the problem. He had suspected arsenic himself because it was on hand in the form of the arsenic-based rat poison, and because Mother had used it on the poor kitten, but perhaps for Father she had used something subtler...

“Some tenderness there?”

“Hmm?”

“You flinched.” Cobble pressed on the spot in question again, right under the navel.

“I don’t like being palpated,” he said, by way of explanation. His own dark thoughts had caused him to flinch, of course.

"I see. One more to go. Hold your head still." Dr. Cobble began to feel at the neck glands.

Hemlock? Hemlock would be subtler, it caused paralysis, not convulsions or anything nasty. And there would be no call to look for it if the death had seemed natural. Where would Mother get hold of it, though?

"All normal here," said Cobble, taking his hand from Wilson's neck.

"Excellent. See, I'm okay!"

"Your pulse is a bit fast and your temperature is 99."

"That's from the walk! See, I'm not flushed anymore either," said Wilson. Of course, he couldn't see himself, but he knew that his face always returned to its usual paleness very quickly.

"True. You ought not to walk back home. I haven't any patients until three, I'll give you a ride, my boy."

"Okay." He didn't want to walk home, and the ride would let him ask a few more questions.

They had to pass through the waiting room to get to the car, and in the waiting room-

"Aunt Irma?" Wilson stopped in his tracks.

"Hello, Wilson!" she said.

"Hello!"

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Wheeler,” said Dr. Cobble. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“I only stopped by to pick up some more of Alvin’s medication,” she said. Addressing Wilson, she added: “Your uncle is taking some pills for his back, pet. He’s not as young as he once was.”

“Oh, I see. That’s a shame.” Uncle had always been so energetic, it was heartbreaking to think of him slowed by pain.

“See Doris for the pills,” said Dr. Cobble. “I’m just taking this young man home, I’ll be back shortly if you need anything else.”

“Good to see you, Wilson. Do drop by sometime,” Aunt Irma said as they left. She didn’t ask why he’d been at the doctor’s himself. How polite and discreet of her!

“Yes, all right,” he said. “I hope the pills make Uncle feel better.” They went out to the car.

“Was Father being medicated for pain?” Wilson asked after getting into the passenger seat. Mother could so easily have given him a bit too much morphine.

“No, not at all. An old soldier until the end.”

Wilson had taken morphine from time to time in the hospital to mitigate the painful lesion in his chest, of course. He looked away.

“Did you attend Father as he died, or...”

"I last saw him alive one week before, as your mother chose to nurse him on her own. A devoted wife, she was. You ought to be proud of her." Wilson coughed and tried to look as though he were grieving, and not disgusted. "I certified the death," said Dr. Cobble. He would have seen any cyanosis. Unless she hid it, somehow...

Bah! Wilson was obviously mistaken. He should let it go. Father's death had been natural. The only way to have prevented it would have been, well, to have prevented him going to war! Say if he'd had a taller, fitter son to go to war instead. Well! That was water under the bridge.

Anyway, Mother was a temperamental woman who hated cats, not a murderer. Except for that one time. But that had been different- not in cold blood. He sighed a little. Cobble glanced over at him.

"I miss him, 's all," Wilson mumbled, and it was even true.

"Of course, of course. Take care of yourself, boy. You don't want your family to feel the same grief over you, do you?"

Oh yes. Guilt me into staying alive. Thanks. Wilson looked out the window and tried to look too lost in thought to talk.

"We all have high hopes for you, Wilton," the doctor said amicably.

"Wilton?"

"You asked me to call you that, didn't you?" No, because that wasn't his name.

If a man who had known him throughout the twenty-eight years of his life could misremember his name, couldn't he possibly also miss a symptom like cyanosis, especially if the light was dim? Dr. Cobble was getting rather old and wore thick glasses.

Of course, 'Wilton' and 'Wilson' were not dissimilar names... perhaps he was making too much of this. Yes, almost certainly.

They arrived at the house shortly after that. "There you are," said Dr. Cobble. "Don't you have an auto of your own?"

"Mother happened to be using it."

"Well, don't walk into town on your own again, and take it easy."

"Sure, sure."

Cobble did not say goodbye or pull out right away, but frowned at the house a bit. Wilson followed his gaze to one of the loose shutters that was tapping rhythmically in the breeze. "Oh that?" he said. "You get used to it. I mean, I ought to have taken care of it I guess but I've been busy. With science."

"In your state you should not be seeing to household repairs."

“It’s just a shutter,” said Wilson, though he was not sure what he meant by that. It was comforting, however, to note that if Dr. Cobble noticed a small thing like a loose shutter- and perhaps the damaged siding from the way his gaze was traveling over the house- he would certainly have noted cyanosis in a corpse! Wilson had worried over nothing. “I’m sure you must see to your patients. Thank you for taking me home.”

“It was my duty as a physician.” They shook hands and Cobble left.

Being an experimentally-minded scientist, Wilson learned from his mistakes! This time he scuffled at the driveway with his feet until the tire tracks from Dr. Cobble’s car were gone before going inside, so that Mother couldn’t have a fit over them later. He might not have needed to bother- it looked like it might rain any second- but it was best to be cautious.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you like it?”

He forced himself to stop clenching his teeth. “‘S great.”

“Don’t mumble, Wilson. Well, why aren’t you eating, then?”

“I’m not very hungry.” He had had very little appetite all day.

Gruesome thoughts could have that effect on one.

At the other end of the table, Mother looked offended. She tapped her fork lightly on the edge of her plate. He thought of the twitching tail of a cat. "You're always hungry."

"Actually, no, I'm not." But he didn't want to deal with her moodiness at present so he forced down a few bites of potatoes. They were quite dry.

"I know how much you like potatoes," she said.

Wilson had never had any particular opinion on potatoes. He tried the chicken, which was rubbery and a bit pink.

"You see," said Mother, "we don't need a cook, do we?"

"Guess not."

She set down her fork with a loud clack. He jumped. "I went through all the trouble to make a hot meal for you, you may as well appreciate it."

"I do appreciate it, really! I have a phlegmatic nature. I don't enthuse." He poked at the food.

"You could make a bit more of an effort." He tried to smile. She looked away. "Not that much effort. That's a bit ghoulish."

"Sorry." Thunder clapped outside. He jumped. "Ah. Gonna rain, I guess."

"Yes, thunder does usually accompany rain, Wilson. I'm glad I wasn't the one to pay for that fancy degree you got... oh, that's right. You didn't."

“No, I didn’t quite earn that degree. I had almost forgotten, Mother.” Uncle had been the one to pay for it, and he hadn’t brought the matter up at all the other day... though perhaps he would when they had a chance at a longer conversation. He did seem to have more important things to worry about.

“I make you dinner and care about your welfare and you’re just cruel to me.”

Wilson closed his eyes for a moment. He had had three different roommates in the hospital before Uncle Alvin had decided to pay to put him in a private room for some reason. All of those roommates had died, painfully, in the middle of the night, but here he was, alive and nearly well, and back home, and getting bawled out by his mother.

Lightning flashed. He jumped. “Guilty conscience, dear? You’re as nervous as a cat,” Mother grumbled.

Nervous as a cat? Wilson looked down at the grains of dry potato smeared across his plate. The white powder of arsenic would blend right into them.

He looked up. A pale specter stood in the corner of the room, cross his heart hope to die, a real ghost with frizzy hair and wild eyes and oh okay that was Wilson’s reflection. All it was. Nothing wrong.

He stood up, shoving his chair back.

“Wilson Percival, sit down and finish your supper.”

"I'm not hungry, darn it! I'm an adult. I don't need to eat anything."

Her eyes flashed but she dropped them to her plate. She picked up her knife and started sawing at the chicken. "All right. I guess you don't need me at all anymore, which is why you live here and take money from the household funds."

"I didn't do any such thing but if you persist on thinking I did then maybe I will start taking your money!"

"I knew it! I knew you didn't really care about me."

"I used to!" His cheeks grew hot the moment he said it. He sounded like the petulant child he kept insisting that he no longer was. "Well, I'm going."

"Fine." Her knife squealed on her plate.

He hesitated a minute.

"Are you going?" Mother asked coldly.

"Yes," he said, and- oh, to heck with it!- he grabbed a powdery handful of potatoes off the plate before dashing off to his room, with a "Well I never" floating behind him.

His shaking hand knocked a few drops of HCl onto the surface of the desk as he tried to pour it. That wasn't stuff that oughtta be splashed around. Maybe it was time for a break.

Wilson set down the beaker and started pacing. Random motion was usually stimulating to his mental processes but at the moment nothing seemed able to untangle his thoughts. He paused by the window, listening to the torrent of rain outside. Once still, the growing discomfort in the pit of his stomach crept back into his awareness.

He had tested the potatoes and found no sign of arsenic. Nothing. But perhaps she'd hidden it in the chicken, or in the cold salad she'd made for lunch- mostly a glob of plain white yogurt with unidentifiable bits in it. Easy to hide poison in there. At noon, in the bright daylight, it had seemed so ridiculous to suspect that the food was anything worse than disgusting. Now it was midnight, and he felt sick. But why would Mother poison him? What would she gain?

He began to pace again. Of course, he was annoying her. That was obvious. But it was a long way to go from knowing Mother found his presence unpleasant, and no doubt wanted him to leave, to suspecting her of trying to murder him. Her own son. Really? And for that matter! Was it really at all plausible that she'd wanted Father dead? What had she gained? Nothing that could not be accomplished in some less fatal way, surely. Although perhaps she had tired of nursing him and wanted to discharge the obligation... bah! No call for poison, she had the means to hire a nurse!

So either calm, loving, dependable Father had done something to deeply wrong her to the point of killing, or she had not poisoned anybody, or she'd gone insane and did not need a compelling motive to kill any longer. Could Mother be insane? No, she was only, er... quirky! Not mad...

His stomach rolled over as if trying to find a more comfortable position. He imagined what he would do if someone came to him as a patient with indigestion and said they thought they had been given arsenic. Wilson had not occupied the role of physician-in-training even in his own thoughts for years now but this was an easy enough scenario: he would give the young fool a pat on the head, tell him to stop reading so many pulp magazines, and recommend bicarbonate of soda. That was all he needed, some baking soda and a rest.

Wilson headed down to the kitchen and started opening cabinets. He hadn't been preparing his own food at all since he came home, so he was unfamiliar with where everything was. What if they didn't even have baking soda? Sadly, he did not have the equipment on hand to manufacture it in his bedroom.

This cabinet didn't have anything in it but a half-empty sack of flour. He opened the next one. Various cans of things, mainly peas. So he had those to look forward to in his future. Peas. Ugh. The next cabinet: his new friend the box of rat poison.

No, it wasn't really rat poison! It must be biscuit mix.

No, it really was rat poison. Wilson took out the box and peered at the stark printed image on it of a deceased rodent.

Now, what was this doing in the kitchen right next to the sugar? The sugar Wilson put in his morning coffee every day, no less? Another potential piece of the puzzle: perhaps Mother was not stark raving homicidal mad, but only a bit forgetful. Perhaps this box could leak, and Mother did not realize that putting it next to the sugar was a recipe for disaster. In fact, maybe she didn't even realize it could kill people as well as rats, and she was sprinkling it around the food because rats liked food. Maybe she had poisoned him through a tragic accident.

Was he poisoned?

He felt as though he might be somewhat poisoned.

The box hadn't been there that morning, he would definitely have noticed that. Perhaps he was only food-poisoned. The chicken for dinner had seemed underdone.

His spine went rigid. A sound of approach? No, only that blasted loose shutter. It was creaking and sounded just like floorboards being stepped on. Gooseflesh crawled on his back and his hands shook. And all for nothing!

It came to him in a flash: If he didn't drop dead of poison, Wilson would have this fear for the rest of his life. Every time he came home for a holiday. Every time Mother sent him something edible in the mail. And worse than that; until the day he died Wilson would struggle over the question of whether or not his father had been murdered. He had to do something.

As a coroner-in-training-turned-experimental-chemist, there was one thing he could do to settle the matter once and for all!

It would be ghastly.

Chapter 6: An Argument With A Shovel

Percival Higgsbury, Jr.

Devoted husband and father, intelligent businessman

He leaves behind his loving wife Wilhelmina Higgsbury and their four children, Priscilla, Patricia, Pamela, and Wilson Percival.

He will be missed.

Wilson rolled the handle of the shovel back and forth between hands that were numb from the cold rain.

There was already thick grass growing over Father's grave, and no flowers on it or anything; it seemed as if no one had been visiting. Not that Wilson should judge them, as he himself had not visited the grave. He had gone into the study several times, but he hadn't been to the grave. It had taken him a few minutes to find it, in fact.

Back at home, this had seemed like an unpleasant task he could steel himself up to do and get over with. Now... it was his dead dad, for crying out loud! Sure, dead was dead, okay, it wasn't really Father any longer, but...

For one thing, it would be quite easy to get caught. Say he found no trace of arsenic in the body. Then he would look like a paranoid lunatic! For himself, he did not mind as much- okay, he did mind, quite a bit, but he could bear it- but Father's memory would be forever, irretrievably associated with his crazy son. And say he did find traces of arsenic.

Mother would be a murderer. Father would be a murder victim. No one would ever remember Father's kindness, his sharp wits, his genius with money or his three successfully established daughters. He would only ever be that guy who got offed with arsenic by his wife. And then got dug up by his son.

But if Mother had killed a man in cold blood, why, she ought to be punished for it. She should be in jail. She had grandchildren! What about Pamela's sweet little twin boys? Would they be safe? He didn't know why Mother would harm them, but he didn't know why Mother would turn to poison in the first place!

Wilson read the inscription again. No. Hot tears mixed with the rain on his face and he automatically wiped them away on a much wetter sleeve. Poor Father! No, this was too awful. There had to be another way to go about things. Perhaps Wilson could just test all the food Mother gave him from now on. If he eventually found poison, he'd deal with that then. If not, then whatever secrets Father had taken to the grave could stay there.

He turned away. A dark figure was standing behind him.

"But- but-" he stammered.

Her voice was quiet. "How could you?"

He took a step back. "How did you get here?"

Mother stepped closer. He shrunk from her. "I saw you preparing to leave the house and I know you've been up to no good, so I got into the trunk!" She... in the trunk? Wilson wanted to call her paranoid, but he had in fact been up to something terrible...

"Your own father," Mother said. "How could you?"

"I-"

"Give me that shovel."

He handed it over. "I wasn't going to do it. Not really. I swear."

"Then why are you standing over his grave with a shovel?"

"I- I know you killed him!"

Her grip tightened on the handle of the shovel but her voice was calm. "I did no such thing."

Wilson kept talking although he knew he should stop- "I knew you'd say that, so I was going to find the physical evidence of it in the corpse, only, I couldn't go through with-"

Clonk!

Wilson fell to his knees, clapping a hand to the side of his head. "What was that?" he asked stupidly.

Mother was waving the shovel. "I killed your father, Wilson? You did."

"No, I-" She'd hit him with the shovel?

"He only went to that war because you were too weak to go."

"But that wasn't my-"

She whacked him again, this time on the right flank, which knocked the breath out of him for a moment. By the light of his lantern sitting on the ground there was an unnatural gleam in her eyes. "

When you had your little breakdown it about finished him off."

Little breakdown? What the-

One more blow, this time to the left side. That one set off a small explosion in recently-knitted ribs. Wilson gasped for air.

"I'm not going to put up with this any longer. I'm through," said Mother, tossing the shovel to the ground. "I shan't be giving you room and board any longer just for you to disrespect me to my face and behave like a criminal."

A thought came swimming up through the nausea: Mother had completely forgotten that he had recently had surgery in the place where she had stuck him. She hadn't even meant to cause this sort of... hold on, what? "You're k... kicking me out?"

"You are already out. I'm saying you can't come home."

"That's the same--"

"Good-bye!" She turned on her heel and splashed off. Wilson hauled himself upright with the help of the accursed digging implement, taking deep breaths. He could call out to her, but it seemed as if she didn't want to listen to him at the moment. Otherwise, she would have let him talk instead of knocking the air out of him with a shovel.

He had managed to reach Auntie and Uncle's house on the edge of town, but had only enough strength left to weakly tap on the door and make a quiet squeaking sound. He repeated this useless act a few times before he remembered the shovel. He had used it as a crutch to get here and now he raised it to bang on the door. It made a much louder noise.

A maid appeared. She saw Wilson, screamed, and vanished.

Now what? He leaned on the shovel and breathed heavily. Perhaps he'd lie down in the rain and die. He was already so numb from cold that it had stopped being uncomfortable.

Someone was coming back. Auntie threw open the door. In one hand she held a fireplace poker. Well darn.

Recognition came into her eyes. She didn't strike. "Wilson!"

"Good evening," he said.

She turned pale. The poker was tossed aside and she drew him into the house. "Oh... oh, you poor darling! What happened?"

She put her arms around him and began to stroke his hair, even though he must feel to the touch like a dying sea creature. She took her hand away and it was red. "Wilson, you're bleeding!"

"I had an argument with this shovel. Auntie? I think my mother may have gone mad."

The cup of tea sent warm steam radiating up into his face. He closed his eyes and wrapped his fingers closely around the mug.

"Why do you think your mother's gone mad, Wilson?" Dr. Cobble asked politely.

Without opening his eyes, Wilson pointed to the wound in his temple that the good doctor had just finished stitching up.

"Now why would your mother do that, Wilson?"

"Why would I make that up?"

"I'm just asking why she would do it."

"I suppose she did think I was going to dig up my father's grave," said Wilson. "And I had planned to, but it was just too awful. I thought I wasn't squeamish but I suppose I overestimated myself."

"You were planning to do what?"

"I had a good reason! You see, I believe my mother poisoned him! I was going to test the corpse for arsenic. I think she poisoned me too, you know. My stomach hurts." He ruefully touched the source of the pain, a spot just under the navel.

"I'm sure once you've drunk that tea you'll feel better."

"For someone who's half English I really should like tea a lot more than I do. I mean, not that I don't appreciate it, Auntie..."

"It's good for you," said the doctor. "Drink it." He straightened up to his full height and beckoned Auntie into the other room to speak with her.

Wilson heard a low murmur of voices. A while later, Auntie came back into the room alone. She sat down close beside Wilson.

"I guess he doesn't believe me," he said.

"Well... he believes you've been highly stressed."

"I guess you don't believe me either."

Auntie thought for a moment, looking somewhat grim. "I know your mother quite well," she said finally.

He sipped his tea.

"I believe," she said, "that we ought to tell your sisters about this, love. They should have some input on what to do next."

"Okay." It occurred to him that Uncle Alvin had not made an appearance. The man must be a heavy sleeper.

"But... Wilson, allow me to be frank with you. I believe that you would not accuse your mother of using poison without basis, but..."

"I won't tell my sisters. They wouldn't believe me."

"It is quite enough to tell them that she attacked you with a blunt instrument and won't let you back into the house, I'd say." Auntie didn't believe him, though, no matter how tactful she was being about it. She didn't think Wilson needed medical treatment for having been poisoned.

He yawned.

"You need your rest, poor thing," she said.

"So do you, I woke you up."

"I was awake anyhow." She stroked his arm.

"I'm sorry about Uncle Alvin."

"Hmm?" There was a look of alarm in her eyes. She had been very intentionally hiding Uncle's illness from him! Wilson really was an idiot.

"Sorry he can't be bothered to get up and help when I come barging in at midnight," he covered. There was no call to upset her any further.

"Oh. He does his best, I'm sure."

"I'll try to sleep now, if that's all right."

"Yes, of course. Good night." Instead of sleeping, though, once she was gone Wilson went into the washroom. It was sort of a silly thing to do, maybe, but he took off his shirt and undershirt- his waistcoat and topcoat were already off, drying by the fire- and looked into the mirror. The ugly scar curved into his left pectoral and the depression beneath it were still there, if partially obscured by an unattractive amount of coarse black hair. He touched the indentation in his skin.

No, he wasn't crazy; no, he had not been in a mental hospital; no, he didn't know why anyone was insinuating that he had been.

There were now also whopper bruises forming along his sides. Dr. Cobble had explained that the damage was not too bad- as could be expected, since Mother was a tiny woman of 4'10 in stature and 51 years of age, who never did anything more strenuous than drive to a speakeasy. The blow to Wilson's head had happened to catch his scalp on the sharpest part of the shovel, was all, hence the stitches. And the blow on the left had hit a weak point, so it had hurt quite a lot- though it already felt much better.

Still, he was sore, although the pain fermenting in his stomach was worse. Which could be expected from arsenic poisoning. Pity no one believed him about that. There wasn't much available in the way of treatment anyway, though. Since the symptoms were slowly creeping onto him, it was likely that Mother had only been giving him a little poison at a time, intending to make it look as if Wilson had simply gone downhill after being weakened by tuberculosis. He might recover if he took no more poison. He might not.

He opened the medicine cabinet. Dr. Cobble had offered analgesics but at the time he'd been kind of numb from the cold so he'd refused. Now he wished he hadn't.

Here was a bottle of digitalis. So it was heart trouble that Uncle had. Poor man.

Wilson found some aspirin behind the digitalis and helped himself to a tablet- Auntie wouldn't mind. That done, he re-dressed and lay down on the couch out in the living room by the fire.

Voices... Wilson stirred and winced. His flanks had stiffened overnight. He followed the sounds of conversation to the next room.

Fred was sitting there with his mother. They were speaking in low tones.

"Freddy!" he said.

"C'est moi," said Freddy.

Auntie stood. "You're awake! How do you feel, pet?"

"Lousy."

"You look lousy," Fred interjected.

"Thanks."

"What would help?" Auntie asked.

"Time, that's all." Wilson sank into the easy chair opposite Fred and closed his eyes. There was a fireplace in here too, and the chair was soft. Altogether more comfortable than his own house, so things weren't all bad. "You got here fast, Freddy..."

"Mother phoned and I came."

"You didn't need to do that!" said Wilson. "You have your own family to worry about."

"Aren't you my family?" Fred looked a touch irritable.

“Of... of course you are, Freddy. But your wife-“

“Darling isn’t so delicate that I can’t leave her for a few days to help out a cousin. The baby’s not coming for months yet.”

“That’s very good of you and all, but what can you even do? Mother will only get angry if you speak to her on my behalf, I’m afraid.”

“We’re not going to go and have a talking-to,” said Fred, over some alarmed noises from Aunt Irma- “we’re putting her away.”

Wilson froze. “Putting her away where?”

This thought had occurred to him of course, he did not think that one’s mother went homicidally insane and then could be allowed to go about her day-to-day murder. But- “Can’t someone watch her at her home? I mean, she’ll... she’ll be so unhappy in an asylum...” He trailed off. Fred looked as if he were not receptive to that line of argument.

Wilson shrank in his seat. “Well, don’t expect me to be happy about it. It’ll break her heart.” He sat up straight. “It’ll kill her! Isn’t there anything else we can do?”

Fred’s lips were white. “The woman tried to kill you with a shovel.”

“She didn’t! She was just angry. It’s a bit different...” His stomach clenched. He bit his lip. Chronic arsenic poisoning was the very height of premeditation. Why was he trying to defend her? Well... “She’s still my mother. Would you like me to say your mother belongs in the loony bin?”

“My mother didn’t beat me with a shovel,” said Fred. “Just stay out of it, Wills, you’ve demonstrated that you can’t take care of yourself.”

“Excuse m-“

Fred got to his feet. “You were well on the mend when you left my home, and now you look like death. I don’t doubt that you’ve been locked in a little room somewhere working all hours on some mad project, ever since I last saw you. Sometimes I wonder if you’re not the one who belongs in a-“

“Freddy!” That was Aunt Irma. She glowered at her son. Freddy sat down. “Just let us deal with it.”

“I can’t do nothing!” Wilson protested. “This is my mother we’re talking about!” Aunt Irma put her arm around Wilson’s shoulders. “Darling, if she is losing her grip on things, it’s not safe for her to live out on her own any longer. And if she’s hurting you, you can’t stay with her to help her. It’s the best thing for her to be in the hospital. They can help her there and maybe she’ll get well again.”

“But...”

"You went to the hospital and you got better."

"But that was a very different kind of hospital."

"It was a place to get well."

"Okay but it was different," said Wilson. "But I suppose that's not important now. You know, what if I talked to Mother, and asked her what she thinks?" Both aunt and cousin looked less than pleased with that plan. "She'll of course say she doesn't want to be placed in a home," said Wilson. "But maybe she'll agree to see someone. If nothing else I have to go and get my trunk." He tugged at his rather disheveled topcoat. "Otherwise, I'll have to wear this every day from now on."

He had promised to take Auntie and Fred inside with him, but when they pulled up at his house he said: "You know, why don't you two stay out here?"

"Wils-"

“She doesn’t like you, you know. I don’t know why not.” Auntie and Fred traded a brief look. “If you know why and you haven’t cared to tell me, then that’s fine, unless it’s useful I really don’t want to know,” said Wilson. He was getting a little bit tired of not being told things, and then being treated as if he were stupid because he did not know those things, but he did not care to argue. He already had one confrontation to look forward to. “Just let me go in first. I’m telling you she won’t want to hear anything you have to say.”

“Auntie Wilhelmina does rather despise us, Mum, I’m sorry to say,” Fred admitted. “Very well, Wills, but I’m coming in after you in a few minutes.”

“Sure.” He would need Fred to carry his trunk anyway. Wilson knocked on the door. A flurry of motion erupted inside and then Mother answered. She was clad in her dressing gown and had clearly not prepared to be seen. Without makeup her face was tragically pale, and her untended hair formed loose, wild curls that spiraled off into random directions; in short it was like looking in a mirror. A weird mirror that had turned him into a much older woman, but the resemblance was still quite strong. “Wilson! Oh, my boy!” She pulled him into an embrace, crushing bruised ribs and stirring up sharp gut pains- his stomach had become sensitive to any pressure.

He swallowed the rising cry of distress. Now wasn’t the time.

"I was so worried," she said. "Out there in the rain all night!" She pulled away. "What happened to your head?"

"You struck me, Mother..."

"Me? Why would you say that? I would never!" She pressed the back of her cold hand to his forehead. "You're warm. You've probably caught pneumonia being out there all night."

"I found somewhere to stay. Do you... not remember, Mother? You told me not to come home." Now, Wilson had a bit of a temper himself, had felt the hot urge to do rash things and commit violence, had gotten into tussling fistfights as a boy. Though it was a touch excessive perhaps, he understood her anger; perhaps he had inherited it. But her amnesia...

"I told you not to come home? When it was pouring rain?" Her eyes were hurt. "Would I do that to my only son?" Her oddly selective amnesia.

"You recall that I was out all night and that it rained but not that you told me not to come home?" She looked blank. He sighed.

"Mother, let's talk." They sat in the living room. Wilson hunched over and clasped his hands over one knee. It was the most comfortable position he could manage while remaining upright. "You seem unhappy, Mother."

She twirled a lock of hair around one forefinger. "Do I?"

“Yeah. Well, you know, I love you... I don’t want you to be unhappy.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“Is there something I can do to help?”

“A gin and tonic would be nice, but that’s for later, darling. Do you want breakfast?”

“No, thank you.” He’d already eaten breakfast and already surreptitiously thrown it up in the washroom. It ought to bother him more that he was fading fast from arsenic poisoning. Perhaps he was in denial. “Why are you unhappy?”

“It bothers me that you seem to think I’m so horrible.”

“I don’t think you’re horrible, Mother.” She would definitely only believe that if she did not recall his accusation that she had murdered Father. “You’ve done things that hurt me both mentally and physically, you know, but I don’t hate you. I couldn’t. You’re family.”

He had perhaps selfishly hoped that she might take that opportunity to say that she didn’t hate him either but instead she folded her arms across her chest and scowled and said: “What have I done to hurt you?”

“You... well...” He pointed to his bandaged head and let his arm fall at his side. “Perhaps you don’t remember. That may be best. Look, would you like to speak with someone? Perhaps someone who isn’t me, would that make you feel more comfortable?” Her eyes were wild and distant. He could read nothing in them. “When I was in the hospital, there was a psychiatrist who would come and speak to me. And, well, he didn’t really make me feel any better, but-“

She got to her feet. “You want to put me away.”

“No, I don’t want to put you away!” He did not stand, he was in too much pain for that to seem appealing. “But- I didn’t want to say this but other people possibly do-“

“What?”

“I had to go and get treated for this gash you made in my scalp. This was you. And the doctor was concerned that my own mother would do such a thing, because that’s usually a sign of mental instability, and I tried to tell him I made you angry but-“

“They wouldn’t put me away for that. Is this about Eric?”

“Eric?”

“You’ve hated me ever since you found out about Eric.” She turned away, folding her arms over her chest. She looked so small and delicate. “He wanted to hurt me. That’s why I shot him. I thought you were on my side.”

“The man in the parlor.” December. Coming home for Christmas break, a dead man lying in the parlor, supposedly a stranger who had broken in to rob the place. But. “You... knew... that man’s name?”

She turned to him. “I can’t go away into one of those places, Wilson. Don’t do that to me.” She could have read it off of some kind of personal identification, she’d taken his identification, he recalled. Before Wilson could see it. But seeing a name once on a card, that wouldn’t bring it to her lips like that.

“You knew his name.” Wilson turned away, putting a hand to his mouth. His ears were ringing. Mother seemed to have lost her tongue. That man’s bones were upstairs in his trunk. Eric’s bones.

“Hello, Auntie? Is this a bad time?” That was Fred’s voice. He’d come in like he promised.

Wilson stumbled over to him and took hold of his sleeve, tugging it like a child. “Get me outta here.”

“All right,” said Fred, calm and unruffled. “Let’s just collect your trunk first, eh?”

“No, leave it.”

“I believe I should go get it. Then we won’t have to come back.”

“Yeah, that... that’d be best I guess...” He would never come back.

“I can go alone.”

“No, I should go. I think I gotta pack stuff.” He had to make sure Fred didn’t see the bones. Fred knew about the bones, Wilson had shown him the specimen, but- but- Fred couldn’t see the bones now. No one could see the bones.

“You sure?”

“Yes.” Walking around made his stomach hurt worse and his bedroom was upstairs. Maybe he’d drop dead on the stairs. Then Fred might see the bones. He should try not to drop dead.

They had to walk past Mother on the way up there. She looked like a medieval carving of a personification of wrath.

The stairs were predictably painful. Unfortunately, most of Wilson’s clothes were not in the chest, but rather they had been worn and now were strewn over the floor. He hadn’t expected to be banned from the house... but the bones were tucked in the trunk and not visible.

Fred kicked a discarded pair of pajama pants. “My word, Wills, you were never such a pig before.”

“I didn’t feel like cleaning up.” He crawled into bed, next to Sir Worthington the Third, which- whom?- was still sitting by the pillow. Poor old Dad. It was just as well that he wasn’t here for this debacle.

“This... isn’t the time for a nap, you know.”

Wilson curled up in the fetal position on top of the covers. "I think I'm dying." He was not unused to dealing with pain- during his illness he had often felt as if there was a hot coal in his chest. This beat that, though.

"Wills?" Fred took hold of his shoulder.

"Don't... oh, it hurts. Just leave me a while. Sleep it off." Pain like this was not sustainable. He must be getting awfully close to death now.

"You're feverish. I think it's about time for a jaunt to the hospital, old man." His voice was tense.

"No, I don't want to die in the hospital. I'll die here. Just let me die right here." Mother ought to be the one to clean up afterwards, since this was her fault.

"Absolutely not. I'm not leaving you with her. I ought never to have left you with her." Fred was trying to pick him up. "Oof, you're heavy!"

"Don't lift me! I can walk." He got to his feet, leaning on Fred. "But I told you I don't- ahhh- want to go to the hospital."

"That's just too bad," said Fred. "I will carry you if you don't come." And he muscled Wilson out of the room.

Chapter 7: Hospitalization

The ceiling was white and faintly dingy. Wilson was lying on his back with one hand resting on his chest. He was covered by a thin, cheap blanket. The room smelled of antiseptics and cleaning things, with an underlay of illness and grime. He turned his head and of course sitting by his bedside there was a nurse. Seeing him look at her, she put aside her knitting. Looked like she was making a scarf.

"Well! You're awake. You came out of anesthetic beautifully. Any complaints?"

"Yeah, one," he croaked, "I dunno why I'm in here."

"Oh!" She picked up a nearby clipboard. "You've had your appendix out," she explained as she scribbled a note. 'Disorientation', most likely. "Do you not remember?"

"If I remembered I wouldn't ask." All he remembered was the pain and begging the doctors to believe he'd been poisoned.

"You're doing just fine. The operation went well." She was a pretty good nurse, he'd say. Cheerful but not inappropriately personal. People like that could be comforting to have around.

Knowing what was expected, he offered his wrist. "Aren't you a good patient!" She took his pulse.

"Had experience. It was really my appendix?"

"Oh, yes. Everything is all right-" she glanced at the clipboard- "Mr. Higgsbury." Well, of course she wouldn't know his name, she was a perfect stranger. "I need to check your temperature now."

“Yes, of course.” He submitted to having the stupid little glass tube placed in his mouth. He did not feel the same supernova of pain that he had experienced before the operation, but he had of course been drugged. However, something had just occurred to him that had not broken through the mental veil of agony before. When the thermometer was removed he asked- “Did I have a fever when I came in?” Fred and Mother had both noted that he was warm, he recalled.

She glanced at the clipboard. “Yes, but you’re tip-top now.” She shook out the thermometer, restoring the hateful column of mercury to its neutral place.

Arsenic poisoning did not cause fever. Appendicitis did. “Well, isn’t there egg on my face.”

“Pardon?”

“Oh, I’m not disoriented, I’m thinking out loud...” He lay back and closed his eyes. “Could I have some water, possibly?”

“Of course. I’ll be right back.” She trotted off. So Mother had not poisoned him. But if Mother had not poisoned him, then all of this drama could have been avoided. Why did humans even have appendixes?

The days passed in a haze of sleep interrupted by bouts of post-operative nausea. He had time to do some reflecting in between throwing up and begging for more water.

What were the absolute facts in this situation? Mother had shot and killed a man whom she seemed to know by name, a man she claimed to be a home intruder. If he took her at her word, the man had intended to harm her, so there was every reason to defend herself- but Wilson could not take her at her word, so he would consider the man's intentions unknown.

There was no evidence that she had poisoned Wilson- this became definite when the operating surgeon came in for a few words and shared that the removed appendix had been clearly diseased and very near bursting.

There was also no evidence that she had poisoned Father.

She *had* poisoned a sweet and innocent kitten, who definitely had done her no harm. Her moods had been erratic and she had been quick to anger. Did she deserve anything so drastic and irreversible as a committal to an asylum? Not without more information. He would have to carefully uncover the truth of this mysterious Eric, and-

"There's no easy way to say this, so I'll have out with it: We've had Mother hospitalized."

Wilson stared at her. He was sitting propped up in bed on a pile of pillows with a forkful of cold spinach halfway to his mouth and half a serving of spinach on a tray in his lap. One should not, he thought, hear that kind of news when one was sitting propped up in bed with spinach in one's lap.

Priscilla looked well, if older than he'd last seen her- well, it had been five years ago. She sat very slim and upright, holding her purse in front of her. She did seem just a little bit drawn, probably because she was talking about putting their ma in the funny house.

He set down the spinach. It was nasty stuff anyway and worse now he'd let it go cold. "You're joking."

"No, she'd always had a nervous disposition, you know, and surely you noticed how erratic she was getting."

"No one talked to me about this." Well, they had, but not in time for him to give an opinion.

"I'm telling you now. We didn't want to upset you, you were so sick." Her hands were clenched tightly on the handles of the purse.

"You've just upset me a lot!"

"It's the best thing, can't you see? Cousin Fred told us... it was true, wasn't it? About the shovel?"

If only he hadn't told them about the stupid shovel. "Of course she was angry! I did something unspeakable."

"But surely-"

"I tried to dig up Dad. I deserved it."

She grew very pale. Whoops. "You did what?"

“Uhm,” said Wilson. “I had a very good reason, you know! I... well, it’s all because a cat died and I can’t diagnose an appendix.” And now Mother was in the asylum. Her life was ruined. He buried his face in his hands.

Priscilla cleared her throat awkwardly, which was something Dad used to do. He nearly sobbed. “Well,” she said, “I think that’s for you and her to work out.”

“Mmhmm.” He feigned interest in the tray of spinach. “How long has she been in there?”

“A week.”

Wilson recoiled. “A week! How? How long have I been in here?”

“Two weeks.” Her back was rigid.

“O-oh,” he mumbled. “I’ll be seeing you soon, then?”

“Mmhmm.” She never returned.

“Hello?” Wilson usually erred on the side of speaking louder when he was on the telephone, but today his voice came out soft and hesitant.

“Who’s there?” came on the other end.

“I-is this Thorney Towers Home for the Disturbed?”

“Speak up, man.”

“IS THIS THORNEY TOWERS?”

A nurse down the hall jumped and dropped a clipboard. Wilson waved at her to show all was well.

“Yes. Who is this?” The fellow sounded as if he hadn’t appreciated having his eardrum blown out.

“Er, sorry. It’s, uh. Higgsbury. My ma is in there.” He was mumbling again.

“Pardon? But don’t yell!”

“My mother. Wilhelmina Higgsbury. I believe she is in residence?” His voice squeaked. “May I speak with her? Please?”

“Yes, I suppose that would be all right. I’ll fetch her.” Wilson leaned against the wall. It felt cool on his face. His intermittent post-operative fever may have returned. He would tell Nurse Franklin that he felt fine when she checked on him next, but she would insist on taking his temperature anyway. Maybe it would go back down before then.

A brief rattling sound on the other end of the line, then: “Hello?”

“Ma?”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Wilson. Ma, I’m sorry. I’m in the hospital so I can’t come help quite yet, but I know you don’t belong in there.”

“Oh, do you?” Wilson couldn’t judge emotion very well over the phone, she just sounded like a squawk.

"Yeah," he said. "I've mishandled some things. I sort of feel responsible, but--"

"Don't. I know you wanted me in here from the beginning."

"No. No, I didn't!"

"You were trying to talk me into going myself. You- after Eric--"

She sighed. "Now you've called me with the phone so I can't defend myself properly. Who else is listening to this call?"

"I called you with the phone because I'm in the hospital!"

Although, others really could be listening. How many separate lines could the hospital have? "I haven't been released yet."

"Of course you are..."

"I wanted to come and help get you out of there in person but I've had... well, I've had abdominal surgery and now I'm having a... prickly recovery." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't think you want to hear details. I didn't want to hear the details. I probably won't be out for another week."

"Of course you won't."

"You believe me, don't you?"

"You have a habit of falling ill when you need to do something unpleasant, is all. Like finish a medical degree."

"Are- are you serious?"

She hung up the phone. The receiver sat placidly in his hand, looking utterly innocent of the whole affair. It was such an achievement of science, the telephone. Somewhere else, people were communicating with their sane and loving family with similar devices. Wilson irrationally desired to break this one against the wall. He should call back right away and speak to the people in charge, and explain that Mother wasn't insane. She was sometimes overcome by emotion, that was all, and when overcome, she... became violent. He'd have to find a way to put that in a positive light. Not his strong suit. Maybe at the moment it would do more harm than good to call. Maybe he'd go lie down in his room and hide under the blanket.

He took a cab home about a week later, picking up the key from under the doormat and letting himself in. Priscilla had sent a letter; she and the other two girls were of the mind to sell the old place and split the money four ways. Wilson had replied that he didn't care where he lived in the end, but for now he had to have somewhere to live immediately, so perhaps that could wait until he negotiated a different domicile, and also all his things were in the house still. He hadn't mentioned getting Mother out of the madhouse. Even though that would still happen... probably... somehow.

Perhaps he could have chosen to stay in a hotel instead. The empty house was dark and he kept having this funny feeling that the ceiling was slowly descending onto him. He made himself some tea and was settled on the couch in slippers, a dressing gown and a threadbare blanket when a knock came on the door. Perhaps he could fool whoever that was into thinking he wasn't home. He gathered the blanket tightly around himself and was very quiet.

"Wills? You in there?" Ugh. Freddy.

Wilson sipped his tea.

"I see the light on," called Fred. Wilson said nothing. The doorknob turned. Ah. He'd forgotten to lock it. Darn.

"I do not want to talk to you," said Wilson as his cousin entered the room.

"Too bad. There are some things you need to know."

There was a small, transparent reflection of Wilson's pale face on the surface of the tea. He looked a wreck. "I know enough. I know my sisters don't have much of a head for legal matters and it had to be you who actually handled the business of getting Mother into that home."

"Ah. Guilty as charged."

“You ruined her life,” Wilson said. Although, sometimes, he had the mad thought- haha, mad- that maybe she did belong in there. And that it may have been he himself who pushed Mother over the edge, and it was just Freddy who noticed. After all, the killing of the mysterious Eric was... not a healthy sign, but she had been rational then. Perhaps the guilt had broken her, and he was the only person who’d known and could have- No, she wasn’t that bad, really... she wasn’t mad... not madhouse mad. Couldn’t be. And if she was, it wasn’t Wilson’s fault! He hadn’t driven her mad!

Fred spoke. “She ruined her own life, I’m afraid. Your sisters were calling for her head and in your condition I wasn’t letting her have another crack at you. What I came to tell you is that you’ll find you have no legal methods of getting her out of there. I’m rather good at my job, and even if I wasn’t, she’s been diagnosed with dementia praecox and she’s a danger to herself and others.”

Wilson made a stifled sound that was half shock, half derision. “Dementia praecox? Mother? That’s not true!”

“It’s what the professionals say. If I were you I’d leave well enough alone.” He gave Wilson a critical look. “You seem to have nine lines. You’ve got to be nearing the last one.”

“Yes, it’s kind of irresponsible how I keep having spontaneous medical crises,” Wilson snapped.

“And residing with people who do you physical harm, and refusing to seek medical treatment until I muscle you into it. Dammit, Wills, I won’t always be there for you! I’m not your mother!”

Wilson flung his free hand into the air. “No, you threw my mother into the nuthouse!” Sometimes he felt as if he would turn a corner and find himself on stage in front of a laughing audience.

Fred cleared his throat. “Yes, that saying was poorly chosen. But look, I don’t understand why you can’t wrap your mind around the fact that your mother was rather horrendous to you. If I were you I would want her gone.”

Wilson got up off the couch and took a few steps away with his back turned to Fred. He tapped his foot against the floor. “Ma wasn’t always easy to get along with, but we can’t all have adoring ladies like Aunt Irma as our mothers. Ma was a decent parent.”

“No! She wasn’t, you idiot!”

“Thanks, Freddy.”

“It gets tiresome, you know, watching someone refuse the honest efforts of his loved ones and run off to be kicked in the head. Well, struck in the head with a shovel.”

“Your opinion of my mother is vastly exaggerated! She wasn’t that bad, honestly. She wasn’t intentionally cruel. I mean, not intentionally! I’m sure she didn’t really deserve to be in-” He turned the corner and jumped back, the mug slipping out of his fingers to crash on the floor. His breath caught in his throat. “She’s here!”

“Wills?” Fred appeared behind him with a hand on Wilson’s shoulder. Mother stood on the other side of the room, clad in her dressing gown with hair disheveled just as she’d looked the last time he saw her. Her dark eyes were round and wild, her hands lifted up before her face as if to forestall some threatened blow. Fred’s hand was on her shoulder.

Wilson started to laugh, quietly at first and then louder. It was really very funny! Of course Mother wasn’t in the house. What he had seen was his own reflection in the dining room mirror!

Chapter 8: The End Of The Road

A rustic home that was in a private, scenic location, the realtor had said. Of course that meant a broken-down little shack three hours away from the grocery store.

Wilson had been planning to take the place whatever it looked like; it was the way the realtor clearly expected him to not notice the problems that made him decide to haggle the price down. 'The siding is rotten. What if I bring a girl here? She'll think I live in a dump!' (Ha.) 'There's not much space. What if I have family to stay the night? They'll never fit!' (Ha.) 'It certainly is far from town, and there's no footpath leading to it. What if I have a party, how will they find it?' (Ha!) And in the end he'd gotten a bit of a discount.

He moved in and immediately put up a 'Private Property' sign. He very nearly put up a sign that indicated that trespassers would be shot, but Wilson didn't own a gun and didn't plan to own a gun, so it would be an empty threat. He opted for 'Genius at Work' instead. It was more positive. He lived three hours away from any populated area, so it was sort of a moot point anyhow.

The attic seemed the best place for a laboratory but it was only accessible by ladder. He spent an afternoon puzzling out some kind of pulley system that would bring all of his things up the ladder for him, failed, and finally tried to go up there only to find he was too shaky to pull himself up the ladder. His stuff sat in the hall underneath the trap door that led to the ladder, taunting him.

He couldn't do nothing forever and muscles did not spontaneously un-atrophy, so he just tried the ladder every day until he got himself up there. Getting down again was rather difficult, but the good news was that the previous owners had left shelves and a table up there so those were things he wouldn't have to transport.

Everything else had to be taken up the ladder, and that took some time, but going up to visit the lab and back down to use the privy or the kitchen or the bedroom and back up to the lab and back down seemed to have a favorable effect on his muscles- or maybe it was the fresh air coming through the broken window? Whatever it was, on the day he brought the chair home from the flea market he hauled it up there with no more problem than a healthy person would typically have bringing a chair up a narrow ladder with a broken rung.

It clunked into place by the wall. Wilson straightened it up and stepped back to look at it. It seemed far more appealing here than it had in the hallway. He sat down in it. He closed his eyes for a second, enjoying the chair after the effort of getting it to its place. When he opened his eyes, he noticed, through that broken window- he didn't have the slightest idea how to fix a window- what looked an awful lot like a car approaching the house.

It was a car. In the stillness of the country he could hear the faint sound of a motor.

No. No one should be here. Bad news? Mother dead in the asylum. Some sister killed somehow? Perhaps it was nothing. He was late on the electricity bill, or someone was lost and wanted directions...

Perhaps he would wait for the person to leave.

Wilson came close to the window, watching and chewing on the lining of his lower lip. The car pulled over- some distance from the house, where the dirt road kind of just stopped- and a figure emerged. That was Fred!

Perhaps Wilson would wait for him to leave.

Fred looked up, taking in the house. He looked into the attic window. He waved. Ah... Wilson was clearly visible up here. There was no lock on the front door and Fred presumably would not require two weeks to train himself to climb a ladder. Wilson was going to see him whether he wanted to or not; he might as well meet on his own terms...

He went down the ladder. Fred did not enter the house before Wilson could get out there to greet him; he found him standing in the yard looking around.

"Hullo there, old bean," Fred said mildly.

"Hi." Wilson rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Bit out of the way, your place. I wrote you to let you know I was coming, but..." He gestured at the mailbox, an item that Wilson had not thought about in quite some time. The thing appeared to be full of mail that no longer fit inside the box.

"Oh, that, well, it's just junk, so..."

"I see. And you don't have a phone?"

"Well, I do, but..." But it had been taken apart in a fit of curiosity and as Wilson sent and received no calls there had been no need to put it back together. There was no service out here anyway.

The wind blew softly in the trees. Somewhere a crow called. Wilson cleared his throat. "Uh. How's your wife? Is she well?"

"Oh, capital."

"Doing all right with the baby?"

Fred leaned against the car. "Yes, he was born three months ago."

"Really! A boy, huh? Is he cute?"

"I like to think so." Fred gestured at the mailbox. "There's a birth announcement somewhere in there, I should say."

Wilson looked at the overflowing mail. "I'll be darned."

"Mm. I didn't just come out here for my health, my dear chap... I don't suppose we could discuss business inside?"

"Oh, er..." Inside. Wilson had not exactly kept his home in a state of guest readiness.

“Or we could go out?” The thought of Fred in his home was not one he liked to dwell on, but out? With strangers? While Freddy no doubt told him things he didn’t want to hear at all because why else would he be here-

“No, you can come in.” He led Fred to the door. Fred, quite a tall man, had to stoop to enter- the doorframe was oddly low. “Yeah, it’s a strange door, it’s never bothered me for obvious reasons. Er-” There was still sort of a scent inside the house from yesterday’s mishap. “Ignore the odor,” said Wilson. “My laboratory is in the attic, but sometimes things drift down. It’s harmless.”

Fred glanced around once casually, then kept his gaze on Wilson- who was suddenly noticing all sorts of things that his mind’s eye had just passed over before, like the boots in the corner, and the jars of things, and the broken, muddy umbrella that he had thrown on the floor in a fit of pique instead of disposing of, and the cobwebs.

“Let’s sit in the living room,” he said, ushering Fred through another doorway that was too low for him.

Fred took in the living room at a glance. “Is that a squirrel?”

“That?” Wilson pretended as if he had not thought the tower of animal cages (some empty, some not) in the corner of the room was worthy of notice before. “It may be.” Of course it was. Her name was Chrysanthemum and he was going to release her in the morning, since he didn’t need a squirrel for anything and had just wanted one to look at.

“Am I to ignore that odor as well?”

“It’s the animals. The cages are kept clean, but the animals have their own... perhaps the kitchen.”

“I suppose you have someone in to see to those,” Fred said, with a tiny lilt at the end that almost turned it into a question but not quite. In Fred’s mind there would be a right answer and a wrong answer to that question.

Wilson chose to pretend he had not heard and take Fred into the kitchen instead. “If you don’t like their smell we can talk in here.” The kitchen was clean, since Wilson actually used it.

“Ah, you have someone to clean in here, I take it,” said Fred. No. He had one plate and one mug and one water glass and one set of silverware, so that he was forced to wash them as soon as they were dirty, and if he noticed something on the counter he wiped it up. Having had such a rotten time with appendicitis Wilson was meticulous about his food safety, never wanting to be in the hospital with a gastrointestinal complaint again if he could help it.

The room had the necessary kitchen things, although he often chose to heat meals over the Bunsen burner instead. In here, the electric percolator saw the most use. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Oh, I suppose I'll take one." Fred glanced at the corner of the room. There was a small folding table there with a single chair at it, both on the small side. Items that were a touch undersized to be comfortable for the average man tended to be available secondhand at a discount and they fit Wilson and his short legs pretty well.

He had not been inclined to buy extra furniture for guests he did not expect or desire to entertain. He couldn't really afford it either. His share of the money from selling off the old place had been made to go far but it was reaching its limits. "I'll make the coffee here, and we can sit somewhere else," said Wilson.

"No, this won't take long, I'll stand. But I'm wondering if you have such a thing as a W.C. in this house."

"There was another door in the living room, it leads to a short hallway, the door on the right is the bathroom." The other door was the bedroom, and Fred must not go in there- it was just a bunch of blankets and pillows on the floor. A bedframe and mattress were expensive things and had not been a priority. Oh, and there were more animal cages in there.

Fred left the room. Wilson took the tin of coffee out from the cabinet and froze in mid-action, staring stupidly at it. He had just recalled that the bathroom had a sort of fungus problem. Wilson had cleared away the toilet and the bathtub out of necessity but had thrown up his hands at the sink- he just used the kitchen sink for all hand-washing and shaving.

If Fred thought the place was a dump he'd just have to say so; Wilson would appear cheerfully oblivious to any passive-aggressive hinting from now on. He shook himself and stopped gazing at the label on the coffee (it was plain old Maxwell House brand coffee) and got on with things. At least the coffee made one room smell pleasant.

Fred returned for his coffee. He did not say anything about the bathroom, nor did he make a move to wash his hands in the kitchen sink. Wilson handed him his coffee. Fred would get to use the single coffee mug, Wilson would... have coffee after he left.

"D'you have milk and sugar?" Fred asked.

"No." He had quite forgotten that other people altered the taste of their coffee.

"That's all right. I'll get on with things." His tone became sort of brusque and he said: "There's no easy way to say this so I'll out with it, my father's died."

"Oh, Freddy, I-"

“And he’s left you a bit.” Fred set his coffee down on the little table and opened his briefcase, withdrawing some documents and holding them out. “I’m his lawyer, you see... well, I was.”

Wilson wrung his hands. “I’m so sorry... poor Aunt Irma. Poor you.”

“I’m managing. Are you going to take these?” The documents... yes, Fred was holding them out to him for a reason. “Oh, of course.” He took the documents and looked at them. “I get this? I mean, I’m reading this correctly?”

“Indeed.” Fred glanced at the walls. They weren’t an attractive color.

“But you should get that money,” Wilson said. “You’re his son.”

“Oh, he left me enough.” His tone said ‘spare me’. “My father was rather well off. So am I, for that matter.” Fred glanced around the kitchen again. Wilson had already decided not to acknowledge any of that hinting bushwah so he just looked back at the paperwork.

“Three... thousand...”

“Yep.”

“It’s not a misprint?” An extra zero, surely?

“Nope.”

“That’ll buy... a lot of test tubes.” Wilson sat down on the little folding chair.

“Indeed.”

“Why would he leave me so much? He’s always done a lot for me. I never properly thanked him...”

“I doubt you want to hear this, Wills, but since you’re such an independent man of the world now. We felt it was the right thing to do because you have no income still, and we believed your father intended to leave you something that your mother kept instead.”

Wilson looked up at him. He had nothing to say to that.

Fred shrugged. “You never wondered why your father left you nothing?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“It didn’t occur to you that your father, a banker and a finance man, who knew full well he was on the way off this mortal coil, ought logically to have made sure his only son was provided for?”

“He died when I was still in the hospital. I don’t think he expected me to need providing for.” The figurative elephant in the room stirred, opened an accusing eye. “How is Mother?”

“Exactly the same. I dropped in on her before I came here. No change.”

Wilson had gone to see her too. Once. Unpleasant memories circulated in the back of his brain, like muck stirred up at the bottom of a pond. He would redirect his attention and let those settle back down. “If she did keep any money I’m sure she didn’t mean-“

"I don't care," Fred interrupted, "what she meant to do. No one is telling you you've got to hate her, or any such thing. We only wish you'd acknowledge that she was bad for you and you needed to be rid of her. Mother and I are rather concerned that one day you'll bring a girl home who's just like her and she'll drive you into your grave. We all marry our parents in a way."

Wilson looked down at the papers he was holding. "Or become them."

"It does seem as if you don't need help ruining your life." Wilson looked up. "Well, unlike you I can tell when I'm wasting my time trying to help someone so I'll be off."

Fred turned away.

"Wait, Freddy, I didn't mean-" He reached out after Fred and knocked over the discarded coffee mug. It plunged onto the floor and shattered with a loud crack. He jumped. Coffee was everywhere. He put his hands to the sides of his head. His voice rang out a miserable squawk- "Oh, I'm such a fool!" He could sense Fred lingering in the doorway.

"Hey, now," he said. "No, you're not."

"No, it's just something you say when you break your only coffee mug." He got down on his knees and started picking up the pieces of ceramic. "Guess I can afford a new one now, though..."

"I may have been a bit harsh, old thing. I do apologize."

"No, no, that's all right."

"Listen, come to dinner with me. My treat."

"I don't know about that- I have a lot of work to do."

"Come, now! You've been cooped up here too long, I can tell."

He stared at the shards of mug. "I don't want to, Fred, I'm not up to it."

"All right."

Neither spoke for a moment, and then: "It's quite a trip," said Wilson. "I live in Maine now. You came pretty far..."

"I had to do my duty. You're family, aren't you?"

Wilson smiled weakly. "You have more important family now, don't you? Go home and kiss your baby... stop hanging out with your creepy cousin."

He had been led to a stark little room, where his mother sat knitting. She wore a bathrobe and slippers. Her eyes were vacant. "Someone to see you, Mrs. Higgsbury," the orderly had said in a chipper tone. She had looked at Wilson and then looked away.

"Hi, Ma," he'd said. The orderly had gone to stand quietly in the corner and Wilson had realized this was to be a supervised visit. Sure, okay.

"I have no son," Mother had said with a sniff. Wilson had only been out of the hospital for a few days at that point and the surgery site was still awful sore, he'd had almost no sleep, and all that didn't really excuse what he did next but he liked to think that under other circumstances he would have done differently. "What was that?"

"I have no son." She had looked away with an air of high drama.

Conscious of the orderly's gaze, he'd leaned in closer to her and hissed: "Stop that. We can address your disappointment in me later. You are in the madhouse. Mad. House. The asylum for the insane! Ma, I can get you out of here, I think, but I'm gonna need you to work with me."

"Get me out of here?" She had turned upon him with accusing gaze. "And what are your conditions for getting me out of here, hm? You want me to let you take over the house and fill it with cats?"

He had stared at her. "Yes! I myself committed you to the insane asylum, and all because I wanted to bring home twenty cats! You're on to me!" At that point he had been starting to get an awful case of acid indigestion. He really hoped that under more favorable circumstances he would have had the self-control not to address his confined mother with sarcasm.

She had turned away from him. "I knew it."

"No! Ma, no! I didn't- I begged them not to put you in here. It was the girls and Fred."

“Of course. The girls came all the way from across the country to put me in here.”

“Well-“ That did seem odd, as if the girls were jumping at the chance to put Mother away for some reason. He still didn’t understand that part, and had a sense of more skeletons in the closet that he wasn’t familiar with. Those could darn well stay put. “They did, though. I’m telling you, I was knocked out with ether the whole time the papers were being signed. You don’t have to believe me, you can ask the surgeon!”

She had sniffed. “The surgeon at the hospital where you trained in the morgue before you deserted medicine?”

“Yes... but, uh, it’s a different department, I didn’t know him.” The orderly had looked sympathetic.

“I don’t want to talk to you any longer,” said Mother. “Why don’t you believe me?” “You’re just like your father.” Had she killed him? “Get out of here!” Had she killed him because she had grown to hate him? “I don’t want to look at your simpering face any longer.” And now he wondered, had she killed him because he had been going to leave something to Wilson and she didn’t want him to do so? “I know you put me in here and I’ll thank you not to patronize me.” It didn’t matter anymore, she was confined and Father was dead. “Don’t come back.”

The orderly had led him out of the room. Tears had come upon him with alarming force out in the hall, and he'd sat down against the wall and curled up there, pinching the bridge of his nose and whimpering. It was an involuntary, physical reaction that the orderly's entreaties had not halted.

In the end, a couple other staff members had been called over and when Wilson could not be reasoned back into emotional equilibrium- even though he was painfully aware that he was doing something questionably sane right in the asylum and there was probably a room for him right down the hall- they offered him a shot of something. He had gratefully taken the sedative and had no memories of the rest of that day.

Coming out of sleep, he thought he heard whispering and laughter... but it was only the rats going about their business in their cages. It was a noise that had seemed loathsome at first, but he had grown accustomed to it and now could not fall asleep without it. Never before had he mistaken the rustling and squeaking for mocking laughter. How odd.

Wilson sat up and rubbed his eyes. He did not usually remember his dreams, but in addition to the laughter he had the oddest sensation that just a few moments ago there had been warm breath stirring his hair, a voice speaking into his ear words that he did not understand. Must be the third time this week. "Ohhh, I'm cracking up," he sighed, putting his hands over his eyes for a moment. Not really, of course, it just felt that way sometimes. He was fine.

Perhaps he'd get a better night's sleep if he actually used the bed he'd bought instead of continuing this bad habit of conking out on the couch among the rat cages. He was wide awake now. Some warm milk might be helpful but he'd used the last of the milk for breakfast. Maybe he'd make coffee instead, go upstairs and work. Or, wait, no coffee either. He needed to go to the store. Not now, of course, it was midnight.

Work would help. Science always calmed his nerves. Wilson got up off the couch, hit his shin on the corner of a cage, grumbled some irritable nonsense under his breath and headed into the hallway. He detoured into the bathroom to splash a little water in his face- from the tub, since the sink was still taken over by that weird red fungus. It smelled like paint thinner.

A floorboard creaked.

"Who's there?" Wilson turned, breathing harshly, but no one was there. He ran his fingers through his hair.

Up in the lab, he plugged in the radio to mask the noises of the house settling that had frightened him so absurdly. It was an awful nice radio, purchased with Uncle Alvin's inheritance, and such a joy to own that Wilson had thought of writing Fred to thank him for indirectly providing the money for its purchase- but had not done so, it seemed too weird. Especially since he hadn't seen Fred in over a year now and might never see him again.

Tonight, instead of the instrumental music he had left it set to, the radio emitted a hissing and a garbled voice.

"Gah!" Wilson unplugged the thing and pressed a hand to his shuddering heart. "Well, I don't know who I expected to be broadcasting at midnight."

He always left everything at the ready and only needed to step up to the table and start work. Nothing seemed to be going right tonight, though; his efforts resulted only in a minor explosion. Geez, he hadn't had one of those in weeks. He flopped down into his armchair. Maybe he'd just sleep here. It was comfortable enough...

"Say, pal!" That was the radio. The unplugged radio. Wonderful. "Looks like you're having some trouble!" Just a bit, only losing his marbles, that was all. Thinking he heard voices on the edge of his consciousness, or while waking up, that was one thing. But he was quite definitely wide awake, and this was a clear, loud voice addressing him directly. The logical next step, he supposed.

“I have secret knowledge I can share with you,” the radio continued. Wilson picked it up and peered at it. It looked just the same as it always had, a little box of parts and wires. “If you think you are ready for it.”

Oh, what the heck! It wasn't real, it wasn't really being kind- but the voice that didn't exist seemed so friendly and cheerful. There was a hint of an English accent in the voice as well, it reminded him of Father. Being an auditory hallucination, it may have been Father- a mental construct of him, anyway.

He may as well enjoy madness while it was being nice to him, he would probably experience screaming horrors soon enough. Wilson nodded for it to go on talking. Of course a radio had no input sensors, it couldn't see him.

“Okay then!” the voice said as if it had seen Wilson nod. Well, it was a fake voice of insanity. He couldn’t limit it to what the radio was actually capable of! Wilson patiently waited for the hallucination to tell him to go out and murder people or something. Instead, there was a flash of light, and... and... Some unseen force filled the room, an overwhelming wave of energy that pressed in on him from all sides. It reached into him, into the center of his mind, and there it left a series of images and sounds he did not understand, a whirlwind of information- and there too it touched him somehow, pulled out something that had been lying there dormant and woke it up. In that one instant the world had changed. This was true madness, a madness so deep and profound that the sane could not conceive of it.

And it felt wonderful.

The life of the thing that had spoken to him was temporarily inhabiting the radio, he felt it in his hands. Dear voice! It wanted him to do something- build something. Yes. Anything. He’d do anything at all.